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CHINA SERVANT

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IN the interval since the appearance of HANKOW RETURN Mr. Archer has been serving with the R.A.F. in India and Burma, and has brought back with him another story of the China coast more exciting even than its predecessor. It is set in the period before the outbreak of open hostilities between Britain and Japan, when the Japanese Navy was prowling in British Far Eastern Waters, and one of these grey intruders plays an important role in the climax of Mr. Archer's story. The tale itself is of the struggle of the little junk traders to survive in the contest with the vested interests which are attempting to supplant their ancient coastwise trade with the new traffic. The struggle is personified in the conflict between Peter Yule, a reformed young rake who takes his duties as an officer in the Chinese Maritime Customs seriously, and the corrupt and disillusioned senior official who has scruples neither about women nor business. Involved in the tale are various fascinating specimens of the population of the former Treaty ports and the surrounding coasts.

By the Same Author

HANKOW RETURN

CHINA SERVANT

by

C. S. ARCHER



COLLINS

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CHAPTER ONE

THE bar of the Canton Club was crowded with men, taipans mostly, who preferred talking China coast scandal over a whisky soda, to supper. They were wise. The supper with which the Canton Bachelors usher in the New Year is famous for its hospitable indigestibility. The swing doors leading from the bar to the main entrance were propped open. The last vestige of Chinese autumn had gone, and the cold night air was welcome in the smoky atmosphere. The first of January 1938 was an hour old.

Three men, one of them outstandingly tall, stood grouped round a port decanter. The tall man picked it up.

"Have a glass of your own port, Sir Christopher?" Anthony Tribe held the mouth of the decanter poised over Sir Christopher Gartrell's glass, his tapering fingers, with their noticeably upturned tips, half-hidden in the sleeve of his mandarin coat. It was The Tribe's stoop, and the way his eyes crowded his hooked nose, that gave him the appearance of a huge moth-eaten condor. The flapping sleeves added to the resemblance.

Sir Christopher Gartrell nodded.

"That's decent of you, Tribe. I don't mind if I do." He looked beyond The Tribe. "And so will Archy."

Archibald Gordon, Commissioner of Chinese Maritime Customs, moved his glass along the bar. The Tribe filled all three.

Sir Christopher settled his embroidered waistcoat more comfortably round his middle. He flicked at the folds of his lace cravat. In China, as elsewhere, fancy-dress balls were a nuisance, but they gave anyone with a taste for it, an opportunity to observe their fellows. People chose their costumes to express a phantasy about themselves, or to bolster up the façade they hoped to sell their enemies. Either way it was interesting and revealing. For himself, Sir Christopher hoped he looked like John Gilpin, Esquire, Citizen of London, on the days when he eschewed horseback and was in time for dinner. It was—and always would be—an excellent façade for a British Consul-General.

He waited till The Tribe replaced the decanter.

"Tell us about this new preventive job of yours."

"Not much to tell. The Inspector-General of Customs has sent me down from Shanghai to see what I can do to help the South China port Commissioners—like Archy here—combat smuggling. I'm a sort of liaison officer between the I.G. and the Commissioners, though at the moment I'm just travelling round seeing what there is to be seen and what extra staff I think the Commissioners'll need."

"I understand." Sir Christopher paused. "Might there be something in this for Peter Yule?"

The Tribe's eyes brightened. He patted his bald patch with the tips of his fingers, a habit of his when he was interested or amused.

"Do I see before me an anxious widower making judicious inquiries about a possible future son-in-law?"

"Perhaps. Primrose could answer that better than I." Sir Christopher thought of his daughter and smiled. "Perhaps I'm just a British Consul making enquiries about one of his nationals." He paused. "Of course, Peter's costume is outrageous and he had a checkered, if occasionally brilliant career at New College—nearly sent down twice for flouting the college authorities, I believe. But he has brains, and he was the most beautiful wing three I ever saw." Sir Christopher looked at the red light in his port. "I understand your I.G.—Sir Andrew—thinks he has a great future in the Customs."

"Perhaps Old Andy is right." The Tribe used the China coast nickname for Sir Andrew Anderson, Inspector-General of Chinese Maritime Customs. "Certainly nothing is beyond Peter's reach if he will use the front door. But he has second story proclivities."

Archy Gordon smiled and Sir Christopher laughed outright.

"I know, I know. The pot calling the kettle black. But I'm not referring to his amorous adventures, past, present or future." There was a faint, but unmistakable accent on 'present'. "Nor comparing them with my own. I mean Peter does nothing according to the rules. He has a good brain, but he's a thinker of dangerous thoughts."

"Well, let's leave Peter and his dangerous thoughts out of it for the minute." Sir Christopher drank a mouthful of port. "Tell us more about your job."

"There's not much more to tell. The I.G. has sent me down here to advise on preventive work in South China. Of course, the Commissioners of the various ports—Archy and the rest—will carry on as before, except that they will let me have copies of all despatches about smuggling, its

prevention and cure. With these as a guide, and a room in Archy's Hongkong office, I am to help them co-ordinate our preventive work in South China."

"It is, of course, the Japanese blockade that has made this necessary?"

The Tribe nodded.

"The trouble is mainly smuggling by sea. We can act on land as before. But with the Japs blockading the coast and occupying our old junk control stations like Taishan and Lintin in the Canton river delta, and Samun by Bias Bay, Archy for instance, as Customs Commissioner for the Kowloon District, can do very little."

"Very little!" Gordon snorted. "Very little? Less than nothing at all."

Gordon was a tall man, and, like The Tribe, he wore a mandarin coat, but on him the costume hung listlessly. He gave it nothing and it gave him nothing in return. He had a long pale face, fair thin hair and mild blue eyes.

"The Jap blockade and the I.G.'s instructions keep my preventive cruisers inactive in Kowloon Bay. Or they potter about exercising their crews well within British waters, safe, I hope, from Japanese interference. Naturally, in British waters, Chinese Customs cruisers cannot act against junk smugglers. My hands are tied." Archy drank his port with scarcely concealed satisfaction. No one whose hands are tied can be expected to do anything. The only mistakes he can make are mistakes of omission. From the experience and practice of thirty years Archibald Gordon, Commissioner of Customs, knew that mistakes of omission are not noticed in a civil service. No one is paid to notice them.

Sir Christopher turned to The Tribe.

"Not an easy problem, is it?"

The Tribe shook his head. He tested the bouquet of Sir Christopher's port with his big nose.

"Good port this. The same we had at dinner?"

"Still Taylor '24."

"A very civil tippie." The Tribe refilled his glass. "No, it isn't an easy problem, and before we tackle it in earnest, I must get Preventive Deputy Commissioners appointed to all important ports in South China." The Tribe watched Sir Christopher as he spoke.

"Anyone in mind?" Sir Christopher's voice was unconcerned.

The Tribe's fingers went to the top of his head.

"As you've heard—or guessed—Peter Yule. And Henri Bardac. That's why I asked you to invite them tonight. It gives me a chance to chat with both of them." The Tribe paused. "As Archy's chief assistant in Kowloon, Peter knows the Hongkong frontier as well as anyone. He ought to be a great success as Preventive Deputy." The accent on 'ought' was marked.

Sir Christopher refused to be drawn a second time.

"What about Henri?"

"Henri's in temporary charge at Lappa. But when a full Commissioner is appointed there, I'll retain him as Lappa Preventive Deputy."

Sir Christopher smiled.

"What difficult chaps you Customs people are. Lappa for Macao, Kowloon for Hongkong. I suppose it comes from being employees of the Chinese Government, but it's most confusing for the rest of us."

"Don't blame us. Blame him." The Tribe indicated a short round figure further down the bar. It was Lance ffenel-Jones, the Hongkong Colonial Secretary, wearing a paper hat, his sole concession to the fancy-dress convention. "We say Kowloon when we mean Hongkong, Lappa when we mean Macao, hoping we may escape the attention of the Lance ffenel-Jones of life *et hoc genus omne*. And still more in the hope that the Japs won't notice. If they did, it might be awkward for everyone."

"There's something in what you say." Sir Christopher finished his port. "Anyway you've chosen one genuine civil servant. I shouldn't wonder if Henri Bardac's mother used red-tape for swaddling clothes."

"Henri can be depended upon to observe the rules."

"And Peter cannot?"

"I didn't say that. Peter will succeed, if he wants to. The question is—will he want to?"

Sir Christopher glanced down the bar to the door which leads to the main hall.

"Incidentally, I wonder where he is? I caught a glimpse of Primrose just now, walking past with Henri Bardac. She had supper with him, but she has the next dance with Peter."

People drifted from the supper room into the hall, where they stood about chatting. Some of them strolled out of sight to sit on the stairs. A few came into the bar. No one went outside. The air was cold and the majority of the costumes scanty. Archy Gordon turned to The Tribe.

"I saw Peter dancing the midnight dance with Esther van Loon." He hesitated. "That was a good hour ago."

The Tribe raised his eyebrows.

"Go on, Archy. Don't be afraid. And Esther was looking nearly as lovely as she did in Pekin ten years ago." The Tribe rolled the stem of his port glass between his fingers. "And, no doubt, just as kissable."

"And when twelve struck just as kissed."

"You saw that? Even after the annual failure of the lights? My dear Archy, you have eyes like a cat."

Gordon retreated into his port. It was all very well for The Tribe to bluster. But if Peter Yule kissed Esther on the mouth, and in public, neither of them with more clothes on than were needed to cover bare essentials, and then disappeared with her for a good hour Gordon shrugged his shoulders. Well, if The Tribe, whom everyone knew had been Esther van Loon's lover in Pekin, while she was still Esther Horvath, professed not to mind, he certainly did not.

Sir Christopher intervened.

"Well, wherever Peter is hiding, I hope he isn't late for the next dance."

The Tribe turned his back on the bar and leaned his elbows on it.

"The problem's simple enough. Find Esther and we find Peter. Find the smuggled goods and we find the smuggler. That's good preventive practice, isn't it, Archy?"

Gordon did not reply.

"As a matter of fact I'd like to find Peter myself. I must make up my mind about my Deputies and let Old Andy know."

The tide in the port decanter had ebbed, till the bottom lay uncovered like a smooth rock at low water. They stood idly, backs to the bar, looking through the main doors to the Club House steps. Beyond the steps the light shone on the serrated leaves of palm trees. Motionless in the hard glare, the big leaves looked unnaturally green. The leaves swayed and Esther van Loon ran up the steps. She saw The Tribe and stopped short. Her grass skirt parted over her round thigh. She glanced back the way she had come.

Esther van Loon was neither tall nor short. Her hair was dark and arranged for the evening in a halo of tight curls around her head. Her mouth was full and red. Her costume was two round disks embroidered with coloured beads, held in place over her plump breasts, and a grass skirt which did not reach her knees. Botticelli would have approved of

Esther's legs, Solomon of her belly. It was smooth and rounded like a mound of wheat. Her skirt had slipped since supper. It no longer hid her navel. The Tribe wondered for whose benefit that had happened. With Esther, a man saw only what he was meant to see.

Slowly, almost against her will, Esther came to the door of the bar. She hesitated again, waved to the three men and disappeared down the hall towards the Ladies.

The Tribe shook his head.

"Couldn't she have thought of something better than that?"

Sir Christopher glanced at the decanter. He took Archy by the arm.

"Let's leave The Tribe to finish what's left of the port. You and I'll go and talk to Lance ffenel-Jones about this growing Japanese habit of interfering with British ships. What the Japanese do at sea affects us both."

"Good idea." Archy was as anxious as Sir Christopher to leave The Tribe to face the inevitable sequel to Esther's sudden appearance and retreat.

As they moved away, Peter Yule walked casually up the Club House steps. The Tribe beckoned and he strolled to the bar. His leather sandals made no noise on the polished floor.

Peter Yule was tall, dark and lean. He had bright eyes like The Tribe. He was dressed in a short leather jerkin. Behind each ear there was a tuft of hair, and he had made horns for himself with wax. An impudent goat's tail sprouted from the base of his spine. His legs were bare and they had the flat muscular look of the natural runner. Sir Christopher had been right about Peter's costume. It was—and was meant to be—outrageous.

The Tribe pushed the decanter towards him.

"Get a glass and help yourself." He watched him pour out and drink what was left. "For a budding Preventive Deputy, Peter, you lack finesse."

"Meaning, sir?"

"Meaning that there is nothing more conspicuous than trying to be inconspicuous."

"I don't get it, sir."

"No?" The Tribe arched his eyebrows. The gesture made him look more like a moth-eaten condor than ever. "Shall I explain in words of one syllable?" He paused. "If you and Esther had come up the steps together, I might

not have guessed—might not have guessed, you understand—what you'd been up to."

"Oh!"

"But when you send Esther in ahead of you!" The Tribe shrugged his shoulders. "Not that I mind. Have all the fun you can. I did. But don't advertise. It's bad for your career."

Peter snatched at a chance to change the subject.

"Is there anything wrong with my career?"

"Nothing. Nothing so far. Just that you're at a very interesting point in it. What happens to you in the next year, maybe in the next six months, may make all the difference to your future."

"I don't see why."

"Don't you? It's not difficult." The Tribe glanced at the empty decanter before going on. "Now that I'm co-ordinating all preventive work in South China, I shall need Preventive Deputies in every port. Of course, nominally they'll be under their respective Commissioners, but I want people I like. People I can trust to do things my way. My own men in fact. I hope to get them appointed in time for the spring transfers."

"I see." Peter was interested. Promotion from Assistant to Deputy is the crucial step in a Customs career.

"I like you. I like your brains. You know the Kowloon frontier already."

"I ought to—living in a bungalow in Fanling, only three miles from it."

"While you're a Chief Assistant, the bungalow at Fanling is a good idea. Of course, if you become Preventive Deputy, you'll live at No. 509."

"On The Peak?" The Peak is Hongkong's fashionable quarter. Physically and socially its eighteen hundred feet of rock dominates the harbour. "I shan't mind that. After all, as Deputy I'll have to attend to junk control. So a house on The Peak will be all to the good."

The Tribe shook his head.

"I doubt very much if there will be any junk trade to control by then. The Jap blockade, and the Jap seizure of our control stations, has already reduced that side of our work to a farce. If we cannot control them, I see nothing for it but to shut down on the junk men altogether."

"Pretty severe on them, sir. Their junks are all they've got. They must trade to live."

The Tribe shrugged his shoulders.

"And we must protect China's revenues." He patted the crown of his head. "We must take the long view, Peter. New roads are being built all along the China coast. We must foster trade by them."

"But, sir, the roads are financed and built by the bus companies. They are monopolies. Only the company that builds them can use them."

"So T. L. Chuang tells me. He owns—or maybe I should say—he is The Tamshui Motor Bus Company." The Tribe glanced down the bar for a Boy. "Already he is running a passenger and freight service to places on the coast like Tamshui and Swabue. By and by his buses will go as far as Swatow, and gradually they will take the place of junks."

"Freight charges will be higher by bus."

"Scarcely our affair. We can safeguard the revenue on land. As Customs officials that's what concerns us." He took Peter by the arm. "However, we need not go into all this now. Time enough to talk when you get the appointment. You drank the last of that port as if you were uncommon thirsty. Have a whisky and soda?"

"Thanks. I am thirsty."

"No doubt you have good reason to be. Boy, two whiskies." He waited till the right brand of whisky had been taken from the shelf. "When we're back in Hongkong, I'll introduce you to Chuang. He's as cunning as they make 'em, but he's a decent sort, and with a dying junk trade, he's going to make a lot of money. A lot of money even for him—the old crab."

"From what I've heard, he's more of an octopus."

"Chuang Tak Lum—T.L. to his foreign friends, of whom I am one—would not like to be called that. Though he is proud of his Chinese nickname."

"What's that? I've heard him called The Crab often enough."

"Surely you've heard the Chinese version—*Tai shan huang yu hsieh*?"

"Taishan butter crab? Why that?"

"You must know the famous Taishan crabs. Didn't you try one when you visited the station before the Japs burnt it?"

"Oh yes. Now I remember. It gave me a fearful belly ache."

The Tribe smiled.

"Just what it would do. It's delicious, but it gives even a Chinese belly a pain, so it's best left alone." He raised his glass. "God bless."

"Cheerio, sir."

"T.L. should be treated with respect. He's going to be a very wealthy man." The Tribe sipped his whisky. "I've known him for a long time. So has Esther."

Peter did not want the conversation to return to Esther.

"And how does this affect me?"

"It doesn't—not at the moment. But it will. That is if you behave reasonably. Not virtuously. Nobody expects that. But reasonably." The Tribe put down his glass. "Esther is an attractive woman. No one knows that better than I do. But she's the wife of an up-country mish and a Seventh Day Adventist missionary at that."

"But I thought Jo van Loon...?"

"I know, I know. Jo van Loon is a good missionary. Everyone respects him for the work he does in that hospital of his in Wuchow. But socially Jo doesn't count. Neither does Esther."

"But she's the daughter of General Horvath, the old Hungarian count. He fought his way with the Czechs across Siberia after the last war."

"And what does that make her?" The Tribe leaned back against the bar. "Half Hungarian and half guess work. Esther can't help you."

"I suppose I have to help myself."

"Of course. But there are ways and ways of helping yourself. One of the right ways is cultivating the right people—male and female."

"Meaning?"

The Tribe paused.

"Meaning, for instance, Primrose Gartrell. Her Dad's a C.G. and Old Andy thinks the world of him." He looked at Peter with his sharp noticing eyes. "Now, if you were to settle down and marry Primrose...."

"Just like that!" Peter flushed an angry red. "Sound tactical move! Marry the daughter and get the old man to pull strings. Maybe you'd like me to ask her tonight?" He controlled himself with an effort. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to be rude. I'm grateful for advice, but please don't start choosing a wife for me over a whisky soda. You make me feel like a performing bare."

"Performing bare? I shouldn't wonder. I imagine that's what you have been doing during the last hour."

Peter took refuge in impudence.

"Mind's a bit dirty this evening, sir—if I may say so."

"Yes, Peter, you may—though perhaps you shouldn't." He glanced at Peter and Peter noticed again how bright his eyes were. "I don't want yes men for my Deputies but. . . ." He paused. "Well, I do want my own way." He finished his drink. "Dirty perhaps, but clever like yours. See you use your cleverness on the right side. That's the only way to get on." He put down his glass. "Now, off you go and find Primrose."

"Yes, I'd better. Henri's looking after her for me, but I have the next dance with her." Peter was glad to get away.

The Tribe watched Peter till he disappeared through the door into the hall. Then he turned back to the bar and ordered another whisky.

Peter liked the thought of promotion, but the conversation had irritated him. He was not easily impressed by authority and he did not take kindly to advice from his superiors. He knew what he wanted and was confident of his ability to get it. He hoped with the approval of those in authority, but, if necessary, without it.

The crowd from the supper room drifted down the hall towards the ball room. Peter joined it. As he passed the foot of the stairs a voice said:

"Peter."

He looked up. Esther van Loon leaned over the banisters. The two embroidered disks revealed more than they hid. One bare knee was much in evidence.

"Hullo, beautiful." He hesitated. "You know I'm dancing the next with Primrose?"

"I know. But the music hasn't started yet. Come outside a minute."

"Not by the main entrance again!" He grinned. "Not Pygmalion likely."

"No, silly." She came down the stairs and pushed him towards a side door. "This way. I only want to talk for a second."

They went out. In the dark she put up her face to be kissed. The light from a window shone in her eyes. The lids were naturally dusky, as if they had been shaded-in with pencil, but the eyes were green, light green like a cat's eyes in the sun, and amorous.

He kissed her.

"What's on your mind?"

"What did Tony say?"

"Tony?" He looked puzzled. "Oh, I see—The Tribe. I never heard anyone call him Tony before. I thought it was The Tribe in all eighteen provinces." He shook his head. "He didn't say much. Did a lot of hinting. I told him he had a dirty mind."

"You mean he guessed we'd been up to no good?"

"'Fraid so." He looked down at her. "Do you mind?"

"Mind? Why should I mind? It was fun."

"I mean—do you mind The Tribe knowing? I thought...."

"Well, stop thinking." She laughed without mirth. "Tony and I had our fun years ago amongst other places, oddly enough, in that flat you took me to. But he doesn't give a damn what I do any more." She looked down the dark alley in which they stood. "He and I are only business partners now."

"Well, that's a relief." Peter had not heard the last remark. "I enjoyed myself too."

She smiled.

"You did, didn't you? I'll never forget you on your haunches on that white goatskin rug. You looked like something of a wood."

He laughed.

"I felt like something out of a wood."

"What else did Tony say?"

"He went off on a tangent about my future in the Customs. Seemed to think it was bright enough if I behaved."

"That wasn't a tangent. Tony doesn't go off on tangents. That was what he meant to say. And he's right. You must behave to get on. Staying out for an hour with me, wasn't behaving."

"I like that! I thought you said you enjoyed yourself?"

"So I did. But what's that got to do with it? I'm nobody—the wife of an up-country mish. That's nothing but a nothing in China. You know that. If you don't—ask Tony. He'll tell you."

"He has—already."

"He would!" She could not keep the hurt out of her voice. "Anyway, he's right. I'm a nobody."

"What of it?"

"Just this." She turned her green eyes on him. "Prim-

rose is somebody. She's the daughter of a C.G. It isn't behaving to skip out with me and leave Henri to look after Primrose."

"You don't miss much."

"I can't afford to." She paused. "But leave me out of it. I can't help you. Primrose could. She would too, if you gave her half a chance."

"What makes you think so?"

"She likes you."

"How do you know?"

"I'm a woman. I don't have to think about a thing for ten years before I make up my mind. I haven't all that time to waste. No woman has. Every month Mother Nature reminds us that time marches on."

"Everyone's trying to marry me off to Primrose tonight. What am I supposed to do about it?"

"All I want you to do, is be sensible. Play round with the right people."

"The right people! My God, I've heard that all my life. I don't mean to get on in the world by toadying to the right people. It's not necessary, and I don't like it."

"If you don't learn to, you'll be transferred to some awful backwater, like Wuchow."

"Lots of nice things in backwaters." He looked down at her and smiled.

She turned away.

"Have it your own way." She shook her head. "My God, is there anything as stupid as a clever man being stupid on purpose? I suppose I ought to be used to it, after ten years of Tony; but I'm not. Why won't you listen to me? You need someone like Primrose, just as, for different reasons, Tony needs me." She paused. "I suppose it's no use talking. I don't suppose either of you will find out, till it's too late."

"I don't suppose I shall, if the worst you can threaten me with is Wuchow. It can't be that bad."

"Bad? It's frightful. The only good thing in the place is the water from the new Customs well."

"I've heard about the well. In fact recently I've been reading through copies of Wuchow despatches about it. It's artesian, isn't it?" He did not notice her look of amazement. "It didn't cost a great deal either. The health of the staff is much improved, and there's better all-round efficiency"

"Peter! For God's sake! What are you drivelling about? You aren't a sanitary engineer, you're a Customs official. What difference is there between one well and another? They're all holes in the ground. Only some are bored...." She shivered. "Like me."

He laughed.

"I'm sorry. You're cold. Let's go in."

"Yes, let's. I shouldn't have kept you out so long. You'll be late for your dance. I've done no good. Only I wish you'd listen to me. Tony doesn't talk to people for nothing. He does nothing for nothing." She put her hand on the door. "By the way, did he mention T. L. Chuang and his new bus company and the junk trade?"

"Yes, he did."

"I might have guessed." She hesitated. "He says you know as much about junk control as anyone."

"I expect I do."

"You see! If you're made Preventive Deputy, you can help him tighten up on the junks." She pushed the door open. "It just so happens, there is no way in which you could help yourself better."

"You know a great deal about Customs business, don't you?"

"More than you'll ever know." She went inside.

He followed her.

"Is that what you took me outside to tell me?"

"Maybe." She stopped by the stairs. "Peter, Tony can break you. He's broken others." She put her hand on his arm. "I like you for yourself—not just in bed. But for God's sake have sense. Listen to what Tony says. He never talks at random. It's always part of a pattern."

The band stopped playing and for the first time they noticed it. Peter started guiltily.

"My hat! The band! I'm late..."

"There'll be an encore. Run on. Don't mind me." She watched him run down the hall. She shrugged her shoulders and turned towards the bar.

At first Peter could see neither Henri nor Primrose in the crowded ball-room. The band began to play again and Sir Christopher Gartrell danced past. He looked what he was; Harrow and Trinity, Cambridge, and the soundest Consul-General the Foreign Office had sent to Canton for years. Dancing near him was an officer from one of the West River gunboats, dressed in a child's sailor suit. The effect

of short white socks on hairy legs was vaguely obscene.

Peter skirted the room till he saw Primrose. She was sitting by the band, pretending to listen to Henri Bardac. Henri sat beside her, chattering away with both bands. His black silk breeches and lace cravat did not hide the Basque peasant. Henri was a good chap, but his conversation was designed to amuse the female sex between bouts of hay-loft love making, preferably Russian cabaret girls in Harbin, or Portuguese maidens in Macao. Primrose needed rescuing. She saw Peter and wrinkled her nose.

Peter hurried up. He ignored Henri's conspiratorial look and held out his hand.

"Sorry I'm late, Primrose. Will you dance?"

She stood up. There was neither shyness nor boldness about her. She was tall and her hair was the colour of honey. Her eyes were grey and frank, with chestnut flecks in them when she was happy. She was cool and fresh in her dairymaid's costume. Its blue and white suited her, and the warm gold of her skin. Its square neck was low enough to show the firm curves of her young body. Under its ample skirt her long bare legs moved effortlessly. On the floor she slipped into the rhythm of the music. To his hand against her waist, she was young and enormously alive.

He glanced down, thinking she was not as beautiful as he had been led to expect. Her hair was spun gold, but she had an inquisitive pointed nose.

She looked over his shoulder, and, by and by, her silence irked him.

"What's the matter? Cross because I was late?"

"No—not cross." She shook her head. "Just thinking."

"Why think? The Bachelors don't hold their annual ball for people to come and think at it."

She smiled, without looking at him.

"I'm sure you didn't come in that costume to think in it."

"My costume?" He glanced down, puzzled. "Oh, of course, my fancy-dress."

She laughed.

"That's not fancy-dress."

"What do you mean?" He danced away from her. "I thought it was rather good."

"That isn't fancy-dress." She shook her head, still smiling. "You've cheated and come as yourself."

He grinned.

"Don't you like it?"

"It's cheeky. Your goat's tail is cheeky—as if you thumbed your nose at people."

"No harm in that. Anyway, I hope you aren't sorry you invited me."

"Oh, we didn't invite you—not really. Our party is to celebrate Mr. Tribe's new appointment. Christopher invited whoever Mr. Tribe wanted."

"Christopher?"

"My pop." She did not explain. Her mother had died in childbirth in Peking, and Primrose, as soon as she was old enough, had been sent home to school. When she returned to China, she called her father Christopher for fear of reminding him of paternity that had cost him so much. Now she called him Christopher for love of him and of his name. "Christopher and Charlotte—that was my mother—knew Henri's rich uncle in Peking, the one who owned the gold mine in Korea. So we always invite Henri to the Bachelors—if we remember." She looked at Peter. "We were glad to invite you, because we wanted to have a look at you."

"Why specially me?"

"After all the stories we'd heard about this fellow Yule."

"Hope they were nice stories. Sounds as if I was quite famous."

"Famous—or infamous." Her voice was grave. "I expect it's for you to decide."

"Decide what?"

"Which you're going to be."

"Sounds serious."

"Of course it's serious." She looked at him. "You know what the Chinese say: 'A great man is a public calamity'."

"But, Primrose, I'm not a great man."

"Of course not." She smiled. "But, Peter, whatever you do become, don't become a public calamity. Not to China anyway." She caught her soft underlip with her small white teeth. Primrose loved her foster-mother.

"But why should I become a public calamity—here or elsewhere?"

"I don't know. No reason. It's only a Chinese saying." She tilted her head till her fair hair rested on her shoulders. "All the same, you aren't being very sensible."

He caught his breath.

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"Nothing much. Only everyone says you have great talents. I hope they aren't buried in a napkin."

"Someone's been talking. The Tribe, I bet. Damn his cheek!"

She looked surprised.

"No one's been talking. Why ever should you think so? I've been by myself, while Henri talked to himself."

"Well, in God's name, what have I done wrong?"

"Nothing." His vehemence startled her. "Nothing that I know of. I just feel you could be a public servant like the I.G., Old Andy—or even Sir Robert Hart who began your Customs. Maybe, instead, all you'll be is a public nuisance."

"You take life too seriously." Peter spoke flippantly to conceal his rising indignation. "There's always plenty of room on top."

"Of course, Peter. It's only a question of which top."

"Holy Mackerel!" Peter choked. "What is this? A conspiracy? First, in the bar, The Tribe wades into me about my career, then Esther van Loon takes me outside to talk about it some more. Now, in the middle of a dance, you want to know if I mean to serve God or Mammon. I might as well be back at school, or up in front of my moral tutor at Oxford."

"But, Peter, you've got to choose sometime. It has to be one or the other."

"I don't see it. I'm not a mish—I'm a civil servant. The question just doesn't arise."

"Oh Peter!" She wrinkled her nose. "You can't be so stupid. If you are a servant—you used the word yourself—you can't serve two masters. And there always are two."

"What are my two?"

"Yourself—your career, if you like—and China."

"You're queer." He looked at her. "Esther and The Tribe talked about my career, but it's not my career that's worrying you."

"Of course, Peter, I hope you get on." Her grey eyes were solemn. "But there's such a lot to do for China and so few people who can do it. Fewer still who will."

"But Primrose, if I do what I know should be done—without fear and without favour—I can serve both my career and China. Then they'll have to make me a Deputy at least as soon as the next chap—maybe sooner."

"They won't have to." She shook her head. "That's not the way they work."

"You wait." He smiled. "That's the way they've got to work with me."

She did not reply and they danced without speaking till the music stopped. People clapped vigorously, but the band turned away to talk amongst themselves. Peter and Primrose wandered out to the stairs.

As he sat down beside her, he noticed that her hands were finely shaped and slim. Her head was on one side and the ear he could see had a pointed look. He leant back.

"You know, Primrose, you're not right about my having to choose, but you are right this much. Recently I've been doing nothing but enjoy myself—though I'm not just a play-boy."

"I didn't say you were."

"If there was something for me to do. Something I could . . ."

"But, Peter, there must be lots of things simply crying out to be done."

"Such as?"

"That's not fair. I can't know. You must."

"Easy enough to say, but if there was anything . . ."

Through the door to the bar he caught a glimpse of Esther's bare back and hesitated.

"What is it, Peter?"

"I've just remembered . . ." He paused. "Maybe I do know something I could do. It's something I heard about tonight, though it's an idea I've had in the back of my head for sometime."

"What about?"

"About an artesian well."

"An artesian well!" She laughed. "Well, there certainly aren't any wells here—artesian or otherwise."

"I wasn't thinking of here. I was thinking of a well in Wuchow, and of what a similar one might mean for a place in Mirs Bay."

"But, Peter, you're in Canton, a hundred miles from Mirs Bay and hundreds of miles from Wuchow. You aren't really going to do anything. All this is just talk."

"Well, I'll be damned!" He stood up slowly. "So I'm not going to do anything? So all this is just talk? Well . . .!" He stepped past her to the foot of the stairs. "Obviously you need to be shown. The three of you know so much more about me than I do about myself, you all need to be shown, and I'm going to show you—now."

"Now? This instant minute?" She sat where she was. I don't believe you're going. . ."

"Oh yes you do. You've asked for action and action is what you're going to get."

"But what are you going to do?"

"First, I'm going back to the flat to pack and get some sleep. In the morning I'll catch the express to Kowloon on my way to Mirs Bay. You don't mind, do you?"

"No." She shook her head doubtfully. "Not if it's the right thing."

"You'll see. And so will Esther and The Tribe." He moved to the side door that led to the alley. "Tell Henri—if he wants to know where I've gone." He pushed the door open. "And goodbye. That is, goodbye till the sixteenth."

"The sixteenth?"

"Of course. Governor's Cup day at Kwanti. You must come and see my mare Josephine win the cup."

"Oh, I see. Of course I'll come." She looked at his untidy hair and bright eyes. "I hope, whatever you're going to do, Peter, it's the right thing for China."

"Yes. It's right for China. And it's right for Yule." The door shut behind him.

CHAPTER TWO

PETER walked into the Customs office at the Kowloon railway station shortly after ten o'clock on Monday morning. Two Customs boatmen sat at a small table behind the counter. They wore red sashes round their blue serge uniforms and cloth slippers on their bare feet. They were on shore duty, from one of the Customs cruisers anchored in Kowloon Bay. They stood up as Peter came in.

Peter was not surprised to find the office deserted. The Search Party would be on the Canton express, due in at eleven. The rest of the outdoor staff was probably sitting on packing cases in the railway godowns, waiting for cargo for the 'Afternoon Goods'. The remains of the holiday feeling left over from the New Year, accounted for the absence of the indoor staff.

He sat down at an empty desk and put a roll of maps on the blotter in front of him. He took a long envelope from the

pocket of his tweed jacket and placed it beside the maps. Printed on the top left-hand corner of the envelope was 'A. S. Watson, Chemists, Hongkong'.

Through the office window the sun glinted on the restless water of the harbour. A white and green Star Ferry pulled away from the jetty on the right, and ploughed towards the other side. On Hongkong island the Government buildings round Statue Square, and the new Hongkong and Shanghai bank crowded round the foot of the Peak. Above Magazine Gap, where his house would be, if The Tribe made him Preventive Deputy, The Peak was hidden in cloud. Peter thought of the big houses above the gap. They would enjoy only brief intervals of sunlight now, till the middle of April. No one but an Englishman would live for three months every year in an atmosphere of all-pervading damp, for the sake of a fashionable address.

A Chinese in shiny black coolie-cloth wandered in to the office. He leaned against the counter and gazed impersonally at Peter. He was a junkmaster come about a permit to sail. His face was deeply lined and the colour of mahogany. He searched his jacket pocket for a match stick and began to pick his teeth.¹⁴ He picked his front teeth and then his back, opening his mouth wide to get at them. His eyes moved from one boatman to the other. Time meant nothing to him. By and by, the clerk in charge would return. Till then he would wait. From his ancestors he had learnt that waiting for Government officials is an inescapable evil, like typhoons, poverty, hunger and death; about which, since nothing can be done, it is senseless to worry.

Peter opened the Watson envelope and took out a sheet of paper. It was headed: '*Sha-ü-chung Well Water: Result of Analysis*'. Underneath there were four lines of hieroglyphics. At the bottom of the page someone had written in pencil:

" This is a very rough analysis done on Sunday evening.
" Why you can't take your holidays like other folk I don't
" know. I am, however, happy to tell you that the water
" is full of nitrites, etc., and is u. for h.c. (Unfit for Human
" Consumption, in case you don't know). I hope you
" have drunk gallons of it. Yrs. W.P."

Peter grinned. The head chemist at Watson's made a hobby of analysis. He particularly enjoyed analysing

Chinese medicines to prove that their curative properties were identical with those of much advertised occidental remedies. The Chinese medicines were cheaper.

Peter put the analysis into the envelope and strolled to the door. Frost was coming across the concourse from the main entrance. William Frost was the Chief Tidesurveyor and head of the outdoor staff in the Kowloon district. He was a short, slightly built man with iron grey hair and a nervous habit of pinching his cheek. He wore a grey lounge suit. The outdoor staff were supposed to wear uniform, but Frost excused himself on the grounds that the Hongkong Government, while allowing Chinese Customs officials to live and work within their jurisdiction, could not be expected to enjoy the sight of a foreign uniform in the streets. His real reason was his young wife, a nice English woman of the worst sort, who lived in a state of thinly concealed shame, because her husband was in the uniformed branch of the Service, and her flat was in Kowloon. The act of living with him was not sufficiently exciting to compensate for these drawbacks.

"Hullo, Frost." 'Mr. Frost' would have been more correct, but Peter liked Frost and treated him as an equal. "Glad you came. Hope you've been able to fix things for me?"

"Everything's arranged. The *Fuments'ai* is waiting for you now off the pier at Taipo and Mr. Skate will have the *feng shui* man at Sha-ü-chung." Frost looked inquisitively at Peter. "That was all you asked me to do; apart from the sample of the well water I sent you yesterday."

"Yes, that was all." Peter noticed the weal over Frost's cheek-bone, where the pinched blood vessels had burst under the skin, was more livid than usual. During holidays Frost saw too much of his youthful wife. "I'm much obliged."

"Not at all. I was glad of something to do."

Frost wanted to know why Peter was visiting Sha-ü-chung. Particularly he wanted to know why the *feng shui* man had been sent for. The *feng shui* man is a Chinese necromancer. He chooses sites for graves and buildings, so that the spirits of *feng*, wind, and *shui*, water, are not offended. If he is consulted, the local inhabitants do not create trouble over new construction, since they need not fear the wrath of disturbed spirits. But new construction is the business of the Chief Tidesurveyor and Frost wondered, if something was afoot, why he had not been consulted. He did not like to put a direct question.

"You'll see Mr. Kwok at Sha-ü-chung."

"Yes, Cowper Kwok is still there." Like many American-educated Chinese, Kwok Ku Piao had westernized his given names. "He's been there ever since the Japs burnt the Taishan hulk about his ears."

Frost shook his head.

"That means he's been at Sha-ü-chung too long. It's nearly half a year." He looked puzzled. "Though he hasn't been sick yet, has he?"

"Not so far as I know; now you mention it. Maybe Cowper is too proud to be sick."

"Pride won't help him with a Mirs Bay boil on the back of his neck." Frost spoke with relish. It was only fair that indoor, as well as outdoor staff should suffer from the Mirs Bay sickness.

"Maybe he's found a way of avoiding these boils."

"Maybe he has, but I doubt it."

They went into the office. Peter sat against the desk. Behind him, Frost saw the Watson envelope and the roll of maps. His curiosity overcame his unwillingness to ask a direct question.

"Why all this interest in Sha-ü-chung? I didn't expect you back from Canton till this morning."

"And I didn't expect to come back till this morning." Peter held up the long envelope. "But since I've seen what's in this, I'm glad I came when I did."

"What is it? A cure for boils?"

"Maybe." Peter slipped the envelope into the pocket of his jacket. "It's no good trying to pump me, Frost. When I have anything to boast about, I'll boast soon enough. At the moment, all I have is hope."

"Well, I wish you luck. Anything that will improve the efficiency of our junk control from Sha-ü-chung would be a Godsend." He moved to the door. "Specially now it's the only control station the Japs have left for the northbound junks. The system may not work very well, but it's the best we can do."

"Unless we get hardboiled and shut down on the junks altogether."

"Shut down on them altogether?" Frost's fingers wandered to his cheek. "I'd not like to see us do that."

"What else can we do? We're breaking every junk rule and regulation we promulgated before the war." Peter nodded at the junk-master on the other side of the counter,

reduced by the passage of time to the less fruitful pursuit of sucking his teeth. "Our present system amounts to assuming that congenital smugglers like him can be trusted to trade honestly."

Frost shrugged his shoulders.

"There's a war on. Our system works after a fashion." Back at the desk again, he picked up the roll of maps, looked at the blank outside and put it down again. "Anyway, if you find a cure for these boils, we might have a healthy staff at Sha-ü-chung, able to do what still can be done from there."

"That's what I thought." Peter paused. "Anyway, I'm glad you think the boils can be cured. Our elders and betters don't."

Frost pinched his cheek, kneading the bruised flesh between finger and thumb.

"If we find a cure, I don't see it matters what they think."

"It does to them. So long as there's no cure, they don't have to do anything."

Frost did not reply. Peter's habit of criticising his superiors upset him.

From the office door they watched the concourse fill with the strange conglomeration of people which appears from nowhere in a railway station before the arrival of a passenger train. Two Chinese ticket inspectors came out of the station master's office and pushed through the waiting throng. They unlocked the barrier gates and went onto the express platform, conscious, though they pretended not to be, of the riff-raff who must wait outside.

Peter glanced at the station clock.

"Express running a bit late." He grinned. "Even when he comes by train, Archy doesn't arrive when he's expected."

Frost pretended not to hear. The Commissioner's office hours were a byword, but Frost did not joke about Commissioners.

"I'd better go onto the platform. The express will be in any minute now. Mr. Tribe is on it." Frost used The Tribe's name as a talisman.

"All right. And thanks for fixing things for me. See you in the head office tomorrow."

Peter waited till he saw the ticket collectors pass Frost through the barrier. Then he went back to the office for his maps. Instead of going to the car park at once, he strolled towards the railway godowns. No one was about, but he

caught the unmistakable whiff of a Toogood cheroot. Peter liked John Toogood, the general manager of the railway despite his Manila cheroots. Also Toogood was part owner of Josephine, the mare Peter was to ride in the Governor's Cup. He followed the smell through the first godown. From a side door he saw Toogood standing by a bollard on the railway jetty. He was looking down at some junks moored under the jetty wall. The masts of the junks stood up into the morning air.

Peter jumped down onto the jetty siding and crossed the rails.

Toogood waved.

"Goodmorning, Peter."

"'Morning, John. How's the owner this morning?"

"Owner be damned!" Toogood blew a puff of smoke into the wind. "How's Josephine?" He was a stump of a man with a good smile, and a felt hat squashed over his eyes. "I see in the 'South China' this morning she's entered in two races, the first and the last." He glanced sharply at Peter. "If it isn't a rude answer, which is she supposed to win?"

"The last—the Governor's Cup, of course. But I don't want to tell the whole harbour."

"Don't worry." Toogood rolled his cheroot into the corner of his mouth. He looked down at the junks moving easily at their moorings, and at the junkmen, sitting about the deck in the sun. "Even if they understood—with the war and the Jap blockade—these chaps have too much on their minds to bother about gambling on China ponies."

"They don't look particularly worried."

"They aren't. Not at the moment. They've managed to get cargoes. And if your fellows at Sha-ü-chung are reasonable and clear them without too much hanky-panky they stand a fair chance of getting through T'uniang Pass tomorrow night—without that damned Jap destroyer off Samun seeing them."

"Where're they bound?"

"Swabue."

Peter nodded. There were a few tins of kerosene and cases of matches on the deck of the nearest junk. Restricted articles like these would not be in evidence when the junk put in at Sha-ü-chung. There would be no mention of them on the junk's papers. There were no facilities for turning out junks at Sha-ü-chung. Perhaps The Tribe was right and

junk control, with the island stations gone and no Customs cruisers at sea, was not good enough. But The Tribe's solution was not right. By advocating The Tribe's point of view against people like Frost and Toogood, Peter hoped to find a better one. He watched Toogood puffing at his cheroot.

"Why all this interest in junks? Rival concern, aren't they? Pinch some of your trade, don't they?"

Toogood took his cheroot out of his mouth. He looked pityingly at Peter.

"Much good it is, my trying to din sense into a numbskull government official! How often have I told you, trade isn't a cake, where every piece cut by someone else means less for the railway. Trade is a garden, which good traders cultivate together. The more good gardeners, the bigger the crop." He scowled at Peter. "And the more people to squash garden pests, like ignorant government officials!"

Toogood was a railwayman and proud of it. Transport was in his veins. Anything that delayed the movement of goods was a bad in itself.

Peter looked at him slyly.

"Well, if you're all boys together, you won't mind the growing bus competition."

"I don't." Toogood spat a fragment of tobacco leaf down wind. "So long as the railway has a fair share of enterprise—and it's my job to see she has—I'm all for the new roads and bus routes."

"Even for the new road into China over the bridge at Mankamtao—when it's built?"

"Yes, even for that. Just like you, old ffenel-Jones expected me to be against it. See! Both government officials, expecting everyone else to be barnacles on the wheels of progress. But I fooled you. I'm for the new bridge—even if I'm the only one."

"The only one? I thought everyone would be for it." Peter grinned. "That is, everyone except the railway."

"You don't know a crown colony. The military, for one, are against it, blethering about the dangers of invasion."

"But, good God, there's your railway bridge over the Shumchun river, not a mile from Mankamtao. It's been there for twenty years."

"I pointed that out." Toogood sighed. "But there are other people against it too. Cleverer people than the military, though, God knows that wouldn't be hard."

"Other people as well?" Peter was surprised. "Do you know who they are, or why...?"

"Why's simple enough. It's one of the smaller bus companies that owns the first ten miles of road on the other side of Mankamtao." Toogood chewed his cheroot. "However, from then on the road to Tamshui and Swabue is the property of one of the big companies so, if the thing is handled properly, the opposition may disappear." He pulled his hat lower over his eyes. "Anyway, I'm on to them. The bridge is going to be built and we're going to have motor traffic over it into China. So you Customs people had better see there isn't too much confounded delay getting across the frontier."

"This time we'll try not to be barnacles on the wheel of progress."

"The best a government official can hope to be is a little barnacle."

Peter laughed.

"And what has all this to do with junks?"

"Junks carry goods to places that railways can't reach—or goods it isn't economic to send by bus. Don't forget junk transport is the cheapest there is. Wind's free—not like petrol and coal." He peered at Peter from under his hat. "I'm all for the junks, specially for those that do a spot of smuggling on the side." Toogood had not missed the kerosene and the matches.

"Then you better take a good look at them. Anthony Tribe told me on New Year's night at the Bachelors, that our present junk control was so bad we'd have to stop issuing sailing permits altogether."

Toogood stared, his cheroot loose in his mouth. He looked down at the junks and back at Peter.

"You're crazy. The whole lot of you are crazy. You can't stop these chaps. They're part of China. They were here long before the Customs. They'll be here long after you're only a bad dream. If you did stop them they'd starve."

"That's the object of the Jap blockade."

"Well, for Christ's sake! You aren't helping the Japs are you? The junk-masters are between the devil of the Jap blockade and the deep sea of starvation." He looked down at the weatherbeaten faces, upturned at the loudness of his voice. "Poor devils! Don't add red-tape to their other troubles."

Peter patted his shoulder. He had provoked the outburst he wanted.

"Dinna fash yersel." Something about John reminded Peter of his Scots father. "I'm on my way now to Sha-ü-chung, to see if our control there can be improved. If it can be—and I think it can—we won't shut down on the junks. You can count on my doing what I can."

"You'd better. By God, you'd better." Toogood blew a cloud of smoke in Peter's face.

"My hat, how that old rope of yours smells! Reminds me of my old man. He left a smell of stale tobacco smoke wherever he went. Even in the Johnny. No wonder I'm a non-smoker."

"Just as well. If I hadn't hidden behind a cloud of tobacco smoke, you'd have got Josephine for less than you gave me in the end for a half share."

"And why not? All's fair in love, and war, and horse dealing."

"Stealing, you mean."

Peter smiled.

"Have it your own way." He glanced up at the clock tower. "Well, John, as you've seen about the entries in the 'South China', I've nothing more to tell you, except that the way I'll run the mare, you'll be a proud owner, leading in the winner of the big race on the sixteenth."

Toogood snorted.

"Proud owner, my foot! Leave that to them that likes it. I don't want to make my way into the social whirl on the back of a China pony."

"Maybe you'd like Abbas Khan to lead her in?"

"Why not? The syce does all the work."

Peter turned away.

"All right! All right! I'm getting the credit for nothing round here, and as I have a launch waiting for me at Taipo, I'd better push off."

"Got your car?"

"I came in by car this morning from Fanling."

"I'll walk round with you."

They strolled from the jetty, through the empty concourse, to the street. In the car park Peter opened the door of his convertible *coupe* and slipped in behind the wheel. He put the roll of maps on the seat beside him and felt in his trouser pocket for the key.

"Well, now you know about it, I hope you approve of my trip to Sha-ü-chung."

"Why should I?" Toogood stood with his foot on the running board.

"I explained. I'm making the trip expressly to help the junks."

"But how?"

"Oddly enough by siting an artesian well." Peter held up the roll of maps. "Contour maps of Mirs Bay."

"How's that going to help the junks?"

"I'll get a decent water supply for the staff."

"Is the station water bad?"

"Terrible. They might just as well drink arsenic. It's the wate' that's giving them these Mirs Bay boils. I'm sure of it."

"I see. And if you get rid of the boils . . . ?"

"The efficiency of the staff improves and so does our junk control. See? Then my bosses may decide, after all, to let the junks alone."

"And if they don't?"

"I'll put them right, quick enough."

"No doubt." John's cheroot filled the inside of the *coupe* with smoke. "I certainly hope they go easy on the junk people. And don't you forget, if you stick up for the common folk, they'll stick up for you."

"I won't forget." Peter coughed. "Just so long as I don't choke to death first." He started the engine. "And don't you forget to put on your best bib and tucker for the sixteenth. I'm going to introduce you to the daughter of the Canton C-G. I met her at the Bachelors."

"Sir Christopher Gartrell's daughter? Government House stuff. I'm no social bird. I'll see you down by the stables before the race."

"Don't be an ass." Peter let in the clutch and the car began to move. "However, I'll argue with you about that later." He closed one eye. "But there is one thing I forgot to mention. If Josephine does happen to start in the first race, don't get excited and put any money on her. Save your pennies for the cup."

"What's this, Peter?" Toogood walked beside the car with his hand on the door. "What are you . . . ?"

Peter touched the throttle and Toogood's hand slipped off as the car accelerated. As he turned out of the park, Peter looked back.

"You're only the owner. The chap who pays the bills. You left the entries to me. Leave the mare's running to me

too. I'll bring home the bacon." He waved and put his foot down on the accelerator.

Toogood stood in the sun, a wisp of smoke curling round his hand, looking after the green Ford as it slipped down the road past the Peninsular Hotel.

CHAPTER THREE

PETER drove up Nathan road towards the hills round Kowloon. Clear of the town, the road climbed in hair-pin bends to the reservoir. Round the steeper bends the tires protested harshly. From the reservoir the road dropped to Shatin. Along the shore by Shatin inlet, Peter let the car have its head. Once he slowed up, wondering if he should take down the hood, but it would be cold driving to Fanling in the evening; so he went on.

The road crossed and re-crossed the railway and climbed a ridge of wooded hills overlooking Taipo. A mile short of the village he turned down a side road to Taipo railway station. He left the car and crossed the line to the railway pier.

The Taipeng Ferry lay alongside, waiting for passengers and cargo from the 'Afternoon Goods.' This ferry runs between Taipo and Sha-ü-chung, but it takes its name from Taipeng, a town ten miles inland, between Mirs and Bias Bays. Taipeng is the seat of the magistrate for the *hsien*. At the bottom of a flight of steps a Customs boatman waited in the *Fuments'ai's* dinghy. He rowed Peter to the launch with short powerful strokes, proud of his skill at rowing the stupid foreign way. Left to himself, a Chinese faces the way he is going.

As Peter came on board, Mr. Turbot, the tidewaiter in charge of the *Fuments'ai*, saluted.

"Good-morning, sir."

"Good-morning, Mr. Turbot."

"Sha-ü-chung, sir?"

Peter nodded.

"*Kao lao!*" Barefoot boatmen flung themselves at the miniature capstan.

Jim Turbot was thick-set and taciturn. He had left the British Navy to join the Customs with his friend Geordie Skate. The Admiral of the China Fleet referred to the matter in a signal as 'a fishy business,' and, inevitably, along the

Kowloon frontier, Skate and Turbot were known as Fishy One and Fishy Two. Skate was Fishy One and spoke for both.

As the launch gathered way, Peter sat in the bows watching Ng T'ung Shan, the Mountain of the Five Caves, creep slowly from behind nearer hills. Mountains were a mute challenge to his desire to climb. He wondered if it was true, that a tiger lived in the cave nearest the top.

It was nine miles across Mirs Bay. In an hour the launch anchored off Sha-ü-chung. The same boatman rowed Peter ashore.

Sha-ü-chung Station is on a hill that rises abruptly from the beach. The buildings are low and whitewashed, with pine-trees round them and a flag pole at one end. The Customs flag blew stiffly in the breeze from the sea. As he stepped ashore, Peter thought the station looked healthy despite its evil reputation. But his eyes ran up the beach to the station well and he saw, as though for the first time, that the rim of the well was barely ten feet above high tide. Obviously no place for sweet water. There would be seepage from the sea.

Geordie Skate met him at the water's edge. Skate's salute was a credit to himself, to the British Navy and to Peter. Feeling inadequate, Peter raised his hat. The only adequate reply would have been to pin a medal on Skate's chest.

Skate's dog Jock sniffed suspiciously at Peter's flannels before trotting up the beach, his chow dog tail waving over his stumpy body. Jock was half chow, half Boston bull, but he appeared on his Hongkong licence as a Thoroughbred Tibetan Lionhound, and he behaved as such.

"Y'see sir!" Skate looked after him with pride. "Jock knows you're all right. I bet he smelt Babetty off of you."

Peter nodded. Babetty was his Alsatian bitch.

"I remember. Jock had designs on her the last time they met. Only his height was against him." He glanced towards the well. "By the way; thanks for letting Mr. Frost have that sample of well water for me."

"That's all right, sir."

Skate turned to watch the dinghy rowed back to the launch. He liked his present job, patrolling the frontier on preventive work, but he looked forward to his turn as officer-in-charge of the *Fuments'ai*. That would be pretty succulent—his current phrase for anything that pleased him.

Beyond the launch, floating on the water like a crescent moon, a junk rode at anchor. Her reflection broke and

wavered as she moved in the light, incoming swell. Her two forward sloping masts and whaleback deck betrayed her port of origin. Peter nodded in her direction.

"That Pinghoi junk cleared yet?"

"I wouldn't know, sir. I'm just back from patrol." Skate's khaki breeches and high laced boots contrasted strangely with his blue reefer jacket and peaked cap. "Mr. Kwok will know." He shook his head. "Anyway sir, there's little enough we can do with them bastards now." Skate stared across the water. "They smuggled many a tin of kerosene through T'uniang pass when me and Fishy Two were on patrol there every night in the Samun gigs." He ran his eye over the lines of the junk. "But they're fine sea-boats, them Pinghoi junks. Beat through the pass in weather that'd swamp the old *Fuments'ai*." There was grudging admiration in his voice. Skate was two men, like the two halves of his costume. The born seaman in perpetual conflict with the new preventive officer.

"Any reason to suppose that particular junk is smuggling?"

"No sir. Not that I know of."

"Well, check the junk-master's permit to sail and his cargo and let him go. We must be lenient while there's a war on."

"Yes, sir."

They turned up the beach, Skate striding through the soft sand, his long barrelled colt flapping against his leg. He steadied the holster with a muscular and surprisingly shapely hand. He was the preventive officer again, booted and spurred, ready to scour the frontier in pursuit of dastard smugglers. It was a boy's dream come true. He forgot his snub nose and mouse coloured hair.

"Pretty succulent morning for a ride, sir."

Peter nodded absentmindedly. He was looking again at the well. He had no intention of riding anywhere.

Kwok Ku Piao—his foreign friends called him Cowper—met them at the steps leading from the beach to the station. He was broad-faced and stocky, with a wide parting in his coarse black hair. He wore loose-fitting jodhpurs.

Because he was an adaptor, not, like a Japanese, an imitator, Cowper had learnt much from his college days in America. He watched what the Americans did and, if he approved, he translated into the Chinese idiom. He played a good game of tennis. His first service was fast and American, his second slow and seemingly innocuous, till his opponent played it. When Cowper smiled, he showed two rows of strong teeth,

each tooth outlined in gold. The gold was Cowper's savings.

"Good morning, Cowper." Peter glanced at his jodhpurs.

"Don't tell me you've been on patrol with Mr. Skate?"

"No sir!" Kwok's intonation was American. He looked at Skate.

Skate spoke for them both. He liked Kwok because Kwok beat him at tennis with ease and courtesy.

"You see, sir, it's like this. As soon as I got your message from Mr. Frost, I sent off the sample of water by Fishy Two in the *Fuments'ai*, and Mr. Kwok sent to Taipeng for the *jeng shui* man. He was to be here this morning. Well, sir, he hasn't turned up."

"Damn! I wonder why not." Peter looked at Kwok. "I wanted him here to site a new well for your station."

"That's fine."

"I wonder why he didn't come?"

Kwok shook his head. *Feng shui* men were Chinese and unaccountable.

"Well, what do we do now? Go to Taipeng and fetch him?"

"That's what Cowper and me figured you'd want to do." Skate was pleased with their cleverness. "That's why he has his jodhpurs on. And there's three ponies at the back of the station saddled and ready."

"Good scheme!" Peter glanced at Kwok's ill-fitting jodhpurs. "You're sure you'd like to come, Cowper? It's a longish ride there and back." He hesitated. "Of course you could act as interpreter. I don't expect the *jeng shui* man speaks any known dialect."

"Sure, sure I'd like to come." Kwok could do anything on the frontier a foreigner could do. Not better, but, in his own way, as well. That was as it should be. It was not in keeping with China's dignity that foreigners should stay for ever in a Chinese Government service. Once they had taught the Chinese all they had to teach, they should go. Kwok Ku Piao was polite about it, but firm.

"That's fine. But what about me, Skate?" Peter looked down at his own flannels. "I can't very well ride in these."

"I can lend you jodhpurs, sir."

"Thanks." Peter looked Skate up and down. "They should about fit. I'll change at the station."

They walked up the steps, Kwok ahead but walking sideways, not to be wholly in front. Peter glanced at the whitewashed buildings.

"Everything going all right, Mr. Kwok?"

"Yes sir!" The American accent was more noticeable than ever. "Everything fine and dandy."

"Hope you don't mind being left here so long?"

"No sir. Not me."

"You've done very well." Peter paused. "By the by, that reminds me. Mr. Frost was wondering this morning why you hadn't been sick yet." He glanced at Kwok's neck. "You haven't been, have you?"

Kwok showed all the gold in his mouth.

"No sir. Not me. I'm a very strong fella, and I'm a Chinese."

"Stuff and nonsense, Kwok. I bet half your frontier guards are sick this minute with Mirs Bay boils, and they're Chinese. Skate here is as tough as they make 'em, but he's used these boils as an excuse for at least one spree in Hongkong that I know of."

"Now, now, sir!" Skate pretended to be hurt. "Maybe I did go adrift, but the girl promised I'd catch me train, and the boils were proper bastards." He looked at Kwok. "But Mr. Kwok hasn't even had a pimple!" Skate was frankly regretful.

"What's your secret, Cowper?"

"No secret, sir. In China never sick. In America only once, when I ate too much ice cream."

At the station gate, a frontier guard in grey uniform and straw sandals presented arms with a 1914 Lee Enfield two sizes too big for him.

Peter changed in Skate's room. The whitewashed walls were covered with photographs of Hollywood beauties, showing as much as the Hayes office would permit. And of women of Paris who had never heard of Mr. Hayes—all of them pretty succulent. He rejoined the others at the back of the station where a stone flagged path led into the hills that separate Mirs Bay from Bias Bay. Beyond these hills lies the county town of Taipeng.

Frontier guards waited with the ponies under the pine trees. There were two Mongolian ponies something over thirteen hands for Peter and Skate, and Kowloon Yat for Kwok.

Kowloon Yat—Kowloon No. 1—was the first Customs pony foaled on the Kowloon frontier. He was Customs property, but no one thought of him like that. Kowloon Yat belonged to Kwok. Kwok had learnt to ride on him, and, carrying Kwok, Kowloon Yat had learned to carry a man on his back and not mind it much. He was black, shaggy and

eleven hands. Two bright inquiring eyes looked out at an interesting world from behind an unkempt forelock. He was a Pakhoi pony, the Chinese equivalent of a Shetland, and like a Shetland, he made up with fierceness what he lacked in inches. There was an embroidered saddle on his back with wooden stirrups and long stirrup-leathers.

As soon as Kwok mounted, Kowloon Yat scampered up the path. Peter and Skate followed more slowly. As the hill steepened, the path became a series of wide stone steps, on which the shoes of the ponies rang.

Peter looked over his shoulder.

"Any idea why the *feng shui* man didn't come, Mr. Skate?"

"No sir."

"Any idea where we might find him?"

"Maybe at the Taipeng magistrate's, sir. It's his regular hang out. Besides, this morning, Mr. Kwok's water coolie..."

"Mr. Kwok's *what*?"

"His water coolie, sir." Skate hastened to Kwok's defence.

"Sir, Mr. Kwok pays him out of his own pocket. You see, he don't drink beer like me and Fishy Two. He drinks tea, and ice water, from being so long in the States. He says the water from the station well tastes bad..."

"Does he, b'God?"

"Yes sir. Not that I'd know, sir. I can't tell no difference in water. Can't say I care much for the taste of the stuff."

"Go on, Skate."

"That's all, sir. Mr. Kwok's water coolie fetches water every day from the magistrate's well in Taipeng. He says it's a very famous well. Anyway, he never drinks anything else. Well, this morning..."

"How long's he been doing this?"

"Ever since I come here. Before too, I reckon."

"And he's never had a boil?"

Skate shook his head.

Peter stared at Kwok jiggling from side to side, as Kowloon Yat paced under him. So that was Kwok's secret. He never drank water from the station well, and he was never sick. So it was the water that caused the boils. This would show The Tribe, and the rest of them, By God, it would!

Kwok reached the *feng shui* wall, rode through it and vanished. The *feng shui* wall is built to stop devils travelling from place to place. From a distance it looks like a solid barrier across the path. In fact it is two walls about five feet apart, built from opposite sides of the path till they overlap.

The path makes an S bend round them. The wall serves its purpose. In China, devils travel only in straight lines.

"Come on, Skate." Peter drove his heels into his pony. "We mustn't lose Kwok. After what you've just told me, I'm going to find the *feng shui* man, and bring him to Sha-ü-chung. By the scruff of his neck, if I have to."

Taipeng is an old-style Chinese town. It is surrounded by a wall and the wall has four gates that face north, south, east and west. Nearly all the streets are too narrow even for rickshas. Some of them are so narrow they are roofed over. There are flies, dogs, children and smells without end.

They rode through the *Ta Tung Pien Men*, the Great East gate, up the *Ta Ma Lu*, the only wide street, to the magistrate's yamen. They dismounted in the first courtyard. There was a grass plot in the centre of the yard.

Peter glanced round.

"You'll be all right here, Skate, till we come back?"

"Yes sir. I'll water the ponies, and maybe scrounge some paddy."

"Good. And keep your eyes open for signs of the *feng shui* man."

"I'll do that." Skate looked at the rooms round the courtyard. One of them had been used as a stable. "If I could see that skewbald mare of his, or her skewbald foal..."

"All right. You have a nose round while we see the magistrate."

A yamen runner took their bilingual visiting cards, Chinese characters on one side, English on the other and, by and by, the magistrate's secretary, a nondescript young man in Chinese dress, came to fetch them. He bowed over his hands and they followed him through one courtyard after another, till they came to one crowded with trees. Facing them was a big room of three walls, its fourth side open. At a table covered with a dirty red cloth, sat the Taipeng magistrate. He was an old man with a thin face and thin drooping mustaches. He wore a round black cap with a red button on top, and the nails of his small and middle fingers were long and yellow. On the table were Chinese pens and paper, and by the magistrate's hand a worn ink stick and a carved ink stone, with a pool of discoloured water in the hollow at one end. The two visiting cards lay beside the stone, Chinese characters uppermost. On the wall behind, hung a photograph of Sun Yat Sen in a cheap wooden frame, crossed Chinese flags above it.

The magistrate half rose from his chair, his hands hidden in his wide sleeves. They sat down at the table opposite him.

Mr. Kwok introduced Peter and, after the customary polite inquiries about the magistrate's honourable province, family, age and business prospects, Kwok thanked him for the use of his famous well.

The magistrate replied that his humble self and insignificant well were equally honoured. They spoke of other wells, and of the particular virtues of the water of each. At length, to indicate that the interview had lasted long enough, the magistrate signed to his secretary for tea.

As if this talk of water had brought to mind an unimportant matter he had all but forgotten, Mr. Kwok mentioned the *feng shui* man. The *fu shui wen ssu*—Deputy Commissioner—there was no harm in anticipating Peter's promotion—wished to employ the *feng shui* man to site a new well at Sha-ü-chung. The man had been sent for. Unfortunately, he had not come. It was a matter of no importance, but if they could have the magistrate's help...

Peter interrupted.

"Indeed, honourable and superior sir, the well is of more importance than my old friend Kwok Ku Piao realises. The water of the old well is the cause of the Mirs Bay sickness. A new well is essential."

The magistrate glanced at Peter's name card.

"Mr. Deputy Commissioner Yu Li, I grieve to hear this, but, honoured sir, is it not a fact that there is now little Customs work at Sha-ü-chung. The junks . . ." The magistrate waved them off the table, more easily than the Japanese had driven them from the sea.

"It is true, elder sir, that there is not much, but what can still be done to control northbound junks for places like Pinghoi and Swabue, must be done at Sha-ü-chung. Sick men cannot work. Without a new well, we may have to close down on the junks altogether."

The magistrate's attention wandered. He glanced into the courtyard, stared at Kwok, looked at Peter and back at the courtyard, as if he hoped his secretary would appear with tea. He picked up the ink stick, dipped it in the water and rubbed it on the stone. Peter and Kwok watched in silence.

As he made ink, the magistrate began to talk. But this time to Kwok, and no longer in Mandarin. He spoke rapidly, and in Cantonese. Peter could not follow all of it.

"Surely Mr. Deputy Commissioner Yu Li knows of the new bus roads from Tamshui to Swabue and beyond. He must know of the new bus companies. The bus companies need sites for new offices, new rest houses, new bridges. For all these the *feng shui* man is needed. He is busy night and day. It is no wonder he does not come. Even now it would not be possible to find him. Besides, what could he do? The new well will be worse, much worse, than the old. It is always so. And what is the use? As everyone knows, the Japanese, misbegotten monkey-men that they are, have put an end to trading by junk. The junk people starve, and the feeble and unworthy incumbent of the unimportant office of Taipeng magistrate does nothing. Though, indeed what can he, or anyone else do? As for the *feng shui* man, there is nothing at all that he can do. Even if he could be found."

Peter listened, understanding a little, annoyed and confused by what he understood. Kwok moved uneasily in his seat. The secretary re-appeared with tea. The magistrate's face cleared. He went on, this time in Mandarin.

"But, excellent sirs, need we eat bitterness with the junk people? Let us think instead of the new roads and the new bus companies, especially of the Tamshui Motor Bus Company whose new offices were the first to be built. The new bus companies will save the people from starvation." He picked up a pen and rolled its brush to a neat point in the fresh ink. The secretary hovered at the end of the table over the tea cups. The magistrate ignored him. "The roads are wonderful, the bus companies are more wonderful, and most wonderful of all is the Tamshui Motor Bus Company." He drew the ink stone closer, and twirled the brush point in the ink. He chose a piece of paper and looked at Peter. A foreigner would understand. "Everywhere from Tamshui there are roads." The brush made a blob and a wavy line across the paper. "Here is Tamshui and the new road to Pinghoi. From Tamshui there are roads to Waichow, to Fan Lo Kong and even to Swabue and beyond." More lines followed, like the spokes of a wheel; roads built, building, projected; roads the magistrate would like to build. All of them radiated from Tamshui. He knew them all. He loved them all. And he drew them all. When one sheet of paper was covered with a spider's web of lines, he seized another. Road maps of all sorts, sizes and shapes flowed from him.

Peter twisted his head from side to side trying to follow

them. Though he knew the roads and district well, he could not make head nor tail of them, till it dawned on him that, out of politeness and with extreme skill, the old man was drawing each map upside down, so that it was right side up to his audience. The maps were clear, accurate, and to scale. His knowledge, like his enthusiasm, was boundless.

In all the maps, Peter noticed only one omission. There was nothing to indicate that the magistrate knew about the bridge at Mankamtao, nor about the ten miles of road from it to the main Tamshui bus road. More than once Peter tried to call his attention to this, but either the old man did not understand Peter's Mandarin, or he did not want to listen. He finished with the roads along the frontier and the coast, and began to map the roads towards Canton. The paper ran out, leaving only some used envelopes. The magistrate picked up one of these in his bony fingers, pulled it apart, turned it inside out, flattened it and rolled his pen in the ink. The envelopes took him as far as Canton.

At Canton Peter tried again to interrupt. But the old man rummaged in his inner pockets and produced more envelopes and some scraps of paper. It was plain that only a total breakdown in the paper supply would stop him. In the tea cups, the tea had long since grown cold.

Peter and Kwok looked helplessly at one another. They stood up.

Ceremony required the magistrate to accompany them at least through his own courtyard. He showed no inclination to do so. They left him drawing maps for his secretary. The last strokes Peter saw were for projected roads north to Hankow. The magistrate did not look up as they left.

They walked back through the courtyards, Peter gloomy and depressed. When they reached the first courtyard, there was no one in sight. Peter peered into one of the side rooms. The ponies were there, contentedly munching paddy.

"Where do y' think Skate's got to, Kwok?" From the street a voice was raised in anger, shouting something in Chinese. The tones were awry. "That's him outside. He's quarrelling with someone." Peter ran to the gate.

Skate was there, holding the bridle of a skewbald mare, her skewbald foal at her heels. A Chinese, in an old felt hat, sat on the mare. A stream of vituperation issued from Skate's mouth.

"*Ts'ao ni men chia tun'erh niao niao. . .*" Skate was in the middle of an obscene suggestion about the habits of

the *feng shui* man's women folk when he was from home.

"Where did you find him, Skate?"

"Here. Just now. I was feeding the ponies when I heard one of the yamen runners talking to someone at the gate. I heard him say 'The foreign devils are still here'. So I poked my head out. The first thing I saw was the skewbald foal wander into the courtyard. I was out in a flash and just caught the old bastard trying to make a getaway."

"Good work!" Peter glowered at the offending magician. "What's he got to say for himself? Why didn't he come to Sha-ü-chung?"

"He says the magistrate said there was nothing at Sha-ti-chung for him to do."

Peter flushed, but Kwok interposed before he could speak.

"Mr. Yule, sir, if the magistrate's secretary should find us here, everyone would lose face. More better to go."

"You're right, Kwok. But, by God, we won't go empty handed." He turned to Skate. "Get our ponies." He took the skewbald's bridle. "I'll look after this one."

Skate came back, dragging three unwilling animals. Kowloon Yat's ears were flat on his neck and the whites of his eyes showed.

"Here, Kwok." Peter took the reins of his own pony. "Grab Kowloon Yat before he bites someone. We're on our way."

Peter mounted. Skate was already in the saddle. They put their ponies on either side of the skewbald mare, and Skate leaned forward and hit her rump a resounding whack. Her foal took fright and skittered down the wide steps of the yamen. They clattered after it along the *Ta Ma Lu*. In a little over an hour they were back at Sha-ü-chung.

They gave the *feng shui* man tea, but he would not respond. He spoke more than once to Kwok about the certain disapproval of the Taipeng magistrate, if he sited a well. Peter ignored him. Unintelligent and, to him, unintelligible opposition made him the more determined to have his well.

As soon as tea was finished, Peter stood up. Reluctantly, and only to save the villagers from the unwelcome attention of offended spirits if the well was sited without him, the *feng shui* man gave in. Skate came along to see the fun, but Kwok excused himself on the ground that he had work to do.

They went out past the station guard onto the side of the hill. Between the hill on which the station stands and the next one there is a grassy hollow. The *feng shui* man walked

into it. He stopped by a boulder, fumbled in his clothes and brought out a stick of incense and some silvered joss paper. He lit the stick and stuck it in the ground and round it he burned joss paper. While he watched the smoke drift uphill, he muttered to himself. By and by, he climbed after the smoke till he came to a stunted tree.

"Here." He stopped and touched the gnarled trunk with his yellow fingers. "Here the *feng shui* is good. The spirits are not unfavourable." He turned away. "For the Taipeng magistrate, I do not speak."

"Don't you worry about him." Peter took a note out of his case. "Here. This will help you to forget him."

The *feng shui* man looked back, saw the note and shook his head. He went on down the hill. They saw him re-enter the station, mount his skewbald mare and ride off, her filly foal trotting at her heels.

Skate grinned.

"It's not often they refuse money. He's not best pleased, the old so-and-so."

"I shan't lose any sleep over him." Peter put the note back in his case. "Anyway, Skate, what do you think of his site?"

"I'd have put a well here myself, without him and his joss papers."

"So would I. Come on. We'll tell Kwok, and then I must go. It'll be dark before I get back to Fanling."

CHAPTER FOUR

PETER stood in the middle of the race-course stables at Kwanti, watching Abbas Khan lead Josephine round. The mare danced forward on her toes, her neck arched against the syce's bare restraining elbow, her bay coat faintly dappled in the sun. Her nostrils opened and shut more quickly than usual—a thin trickle of moisture in one of them. There was nothing else to show that the mare had just finished last in the first race of the day.

Abbas Khan was a Punjabi Mussulman, tall and gaunt, with a curved nose and black eyes. His khaki jodhpurs wrinkled perpetually about his ankles. He carried a coloured horseblanket over his shoulder. The tasselled end of his turban nodded as he walked. He had no thoughts beyond

his ponies, and the orthodox observance of his religion.

Peter stood with his feet wide apart. His tweed cap was at an angle, and his hands were deep in the pockets of a camelhair topcoat, which he wore over his green and white racing colours and white riding-breeches. One hand held a polished leather cosh which Abbas Khan had made for him before the last feast of Ramadan. Peter was watching for signs of fatigue in the mare. There were none. Her ears pricked forward, her breath came easily. Even the heavy hunting saddle had left no patch of tell-tale sweat. Ridden as he meant to ride, there was no reason why Josephine should not win the Governor's Cup. If, in one month, he could win the Cup and cure Mrs Bay boils, even The Tribe would be impressed. The Hongkong Deputy's job and a house on The Peak would follow. Peter rocked back on his heels, pretending to examine the polish on his riding boots. He was grinning to himself. He lifted his head.

"Abbas Khan."

"Sahib?"

"Put the mare's blanket on and go on walking her."

The syce flung the blanket over the mare and buckled it across her chest.

John Toogood came down the path from the Members' Lawn. He slipped an arm through Peter's and they stood watching the mare without speaking. The green and white blanket, with Peter's initials in the corner, flapped against the mare's quarters. Toogood glanced at Peter and back at the mare. He blew a puff of smoke into the wind.

"Well—she certainly doesn't look tired."

"She's not tired." Peter did not turn his head. "She just doesn't like hurdles, and I don't like cheap races."

Toogood puffed at his cheroot.

"Still, there's not much point now starting her against Jan Stewer and Polly Flinders."

"Now listen, John!" Peter wheeled. "You agreed to the mare racing in my colours. Why not leave her running to me?"

"All right, old son. No need to snap my head off."

"I didn't mean to snap. Only, I assure you, I know what I'm doing."

"I'm sure you do, but, if you are starting her in the Cup would you mind telling me what you were up to just now?"

"Not up to anything; beyond giving Josephine a little light exercise behind a lot of dud ponies."

"If they were such a lot of duds, shouldn't she have won?"

"Who wants to win the first race?"

"Then why start her?"

"You're full of questions, John." Peter plucked his cap further to one side. The angle was no longer attractive. "I'll answer you by asking one. When you came away from the stands just now, what were they saying about the mare's chances in the Cup?"

"That she hadn't an earthly, if you left her in."

"There you are!" Peter squeezed his arm. "The more people who think that, the better." He slapped his boot with his leather cosh. "And, don't forget, in the Cup I'm riding to win."

Toogood smoked in silence.

Peter turned to the syce.

"Abbas Khan?"

"Sahib."

"Walk the mare for half an hour, rub her down and give her half a bucketful of that drink I mixed. An hour before the big race, feed her two tablespoons of honey from the white jar."

"Sahib."

"And don't forget, next time, the light saddle."

"No, sahib." Abbas Khan touched his turban. He would not forget. In the big race, his month's pay would be on the mare to win.

Peter turned to John.

"We're on a good thing, old man. Jan Stewer will be a hot favourite. With the rest of the money on Lady Turpin's Polly Flinders. If Josephine wins—and by hook or crook I'm determined she shall—she'll pay a packet." Over Toogood's shoulder Peter saw Primrose Gartrell coming down the path towards them.

Primrose wore a fawn coat and skirt and a saucy hat on her fair hair. She carried a shooting stick she had borrowed from Peter's bungalow. Babetty, Peter's Alsatian bitch, trotted on a lead in front. Henri Bardac came behind. He wore, what he thought were suitable clothes for a sportif day's racing with the English. Babetty caught sight of Peter. Her ears cocked forward into two fat triangles of eagerness. She pulled on the lead.

"Hullo, Primrose." Peter fended off Babetty's wet inquisitive nose with the sole of his boot. "Hullo, Henri. I was just explaining to John Toogood here. . . ." He turned.

Toogood, his hat in his hand, his cheroot between his fingers, was already moving away.

"It doesn't matter, Peter. You're busy. I'll see you by the saddling enclosure before the big race."

"No, Don't go, John. I want to introduce you and I've something. . . ."

"No, no." Toogood smiled at Primrose's slim youth. "I'll see you later."

Primrose watched him down the path.

"So that's John Toogood, the manager of the railway." She paused. "He's nice."

Peter nodded.

"John's a good chap, but shy." He gazed after Toogood's retreating back. "And maybe a bit straightlaced."

"He owns the other half of Josephine, doesn't he? I bet he was asking you about her running in the first race."

"Yes—if you must know—he was." Peter glanced round the stables. "I explained it to him."

"Did you?" She pushed a strand of honey-coloured hair behind one ear. "Then Henri and I would like it explained to us. I had two dollars on you and Josephine and. . ."

"Primrose!" He turned accusingly on Henri. "Damn it, Henri! I told you at tiffin not to back me in the first race."

"Mon Dieu! Do not blame me. The lady went herself to the *pari mutuel* with her two dollars." Henri shrugged his shoulders. Other people's money was unimportant to him. He looked at Josephine. "So, next time, this one wins the big race?" He paused. "*Vraiment?*"

"You sound doubtful."

"But no! Not doubtful, only. . ."

Primrose plucked at Peter's sleeve."

"Don't waste time on him, Peter. He only knows one end of a pony from the other by the tail. Explain to me about my two dollars and. . ." She looked at Peter questioningly. "And, Peter, is Josephine still in the Governor's Cup?"

He watched the winter sunlight in her hair. Her eyes were grey and difficult to meet.

"Small girls shouldn't poke their noses, however pointed, into questions of high finance." He moved towards the path.

"Come to the lawn. I'll buy you a ginger pop."

She did not move.

"I like my questions answered, Peter."

"Come on. You know you're thirsty. Besides, I have something important to tell you two. I'd have told John as well, if he hadn't rushed off." Peter walked away.

Determined not to be left again, Babetty set off after him dragging Primrose along.

"Come on, Henri." Primrose called over her shoulder. "If he won't tell us about his crooked riding in the first race, nor what he's going to do about the Governor's Cup, we may as well find out what he's been up to, since he ran away from the Bachelors' Ball." She went down the path towards the Members' Lawn.

The Members' Lawn is the social centre of Kwanti. There are hedges of sweet-peas at each corner of it, and in the middle a flower bed where violets and pansies make a modest English border for the aristocratic elegance of African daisies.

The race-course itself is in a shallow valley. It is green and well kept. Its whitewashed rails and matshed grandstands, beflagged on race days, give it a gay colourful look. There are clumps of trees and bamboo thickets, and a road beside it through the valley. Beyond the road, paddy-fields, framed by irrigation ditches, rise in irregular terraces to the foothills. But for the matsheds, the bamboo and the sweet-peas flowering in January, Kwanti would pass for a county race-course anywhere in England.

The stands were filling up. Every big house on The Peak had sent its youth to see, and its beauty to be seen. There was a sprinkling of Young China, the men over-conscious of the bright newness of their binocular cases; the women silk-clad, slim and chattering.

Primrose sat down at one of the tables scattered about the lawn. Babetty flopped at her feet. Her ears cocked, the bitch watched Peter as far as the matshed bar. Her tongue lolled out and, by and by, she forgot about it. Henri opened the shooting stick and propped himself on it, looking insecure and no more English than before.

Sir Christopher Gartrell arrived with the Governor, Sir William Turpin, and Lady Turpin, part owner of Polly Flinders. Tom Backhouse, the Governor's A.D.C., was with them. Mary ffenel-Jones, the daughter of the Colonial Secretary, was with Tom. Mary was a plump fair girl whose China blue eyes followed Tom's six feet one inch of cavalry school figure as a spotlight follows an actor, and, actor-like Tom feigned ignorance, while secretly he enjoyed their slavish pursuit. Sir Christopher waved to his daughter,

but he followed the rest of his party to the Members' stand. It was time for the second race.

Two ponies crossed the lawn as Peter came back with the drinks. The first was a black stallion who showed the whites of his eyes as he walked. Jan Stewer did not like being passed in a race. He had won the Governor's Cup two years in succession and would be a hot favourite again. Polly Flinders followed. Polly was a light chestnut, whose blonde tail reached her fetlocks. She had a tremendous turn of speed but might not stay. She would be second favourite. The mafoos touched their caps. They knew that Josephine, if she was cleverly ridden, might win. Peter paused to look after them. He frowned.

Primrose glanced up from scratching Babetty's ear.

"What are you scowling at now, Peter?"

"You know Jan Stewer has been sold?"

"So I heard." She glanced after the pony. "Who bought him?"

"That's what I'd like to know. Ned Parker-Jervis has the ride, but I don't recognize that red and white blanket." He consulted his race card. "It says here: 'Red and white polka dots, scarlet cap.' And under the stable name—'We Three'. Never even heard of them." He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, I know Ned P-J has the ride and that's all I need to know." He put the drinks on the table.

Henri left the shooting stick and came over to join them. Stuck in the ground with no behind to support, the stick had a surprised, vacant look. Henri helped himself and sat down in a chair.

"So, mon vieux, now we are again comfortable, we are ready to listen."

"Yes, Peter." Primrose looked at him over her ginger pop. "We're all ears."

Peter remembered her pointed ears, but he spoke to Henri.

"You got my chit about Mirs Bay boils?"

"Indeed yes."

"Just as I thought, the Sha-ti-chung Station well is the cause of them."

"So! And what has been done about it?"

"I sent off a despatch to the I.G., asking permission to bore an artesian well."

"And you did not forget to tell him that the *feng shui* man had chosen the site. That would please Old Andy."

"Please him nothing! The old devil turned my well down."

"Turned it down!" Henri looked properly disgusted. "Mon Dieu, why?"

"Because," Peter drew breath, "'considering the unprecedented drop in junk traffic due to the Japanese blockade, the present is not considered a suitable juncture for the Service to incur fresh expenditure in Mirs Bay, for which no provision has been made in the budget, bla, bla, bla...' In other words, they don't feel like doing anything, so they bloody well aren't going to do anything—if they can help it."

"I see." Henri would not have spoken so vehemently about the Inspectorate. "Such bad luck! And you hoped your well would make a big success for you."

"Don't worry, Henri. My well is still going to be a big success."

"But the Inspectorate have turned it down!"

"On the score of expense. So what? So I've replied by despatch—that is, I hope Archy has replied—that it's more expensive not to bore it."

"More expensive not to bore it? *Nom de nom*, it is not possible!"

"Possible or not, it's true. Frost—who's just as keen on my well as I am, now he knows about it—has got out figures to show that extra sickness from boils in Mirs Bay, is costing the Service \$10,000 a year in lost patrol man-hours. The whole bloody well shouldn't cost more than \$6,000."

"It's incredible!"

"I tell you it's true, and if Archy only signs my despatch, the Inspectorate will damn well have to give me my well."

Henri glanced at Primrose. She was scratching Babetty, but her head was on one side, and her hair had fallen away from one obviously listening ear. She looked up, her eyes grey and troubled. Henri was not happy either. If the Inspectorate had made up its mind, making it look foolish, would not help.

"And what did Archy say? He does not like to argue with the I.G."

"Archy! As usual, he hummed and hawed and tried to worm out of doing anything."

Archibald Gordon was a full Commissioner because he knew that in a civil service it is often better, and always easier, to do nothing.

"But I had a brain wave."

Henri was sure it would have been better not to have had a brain wave, but he said nothing.

"I promised Archy I'd have my despatch typed out and ready for him to sign by 5 o'clock yesterday afternoon. He fell for that."

"Bravo, *mon vieux*, bravo!"

"But, Peter, I don't understand." Primrose looked from one to the other. "Yesterday afternoon? Yesterday was a Saturday. Mr. Gordon is a Commissioner. He wouldn't even be in the office."

"Ah, *ma petite*," Henri wagged a knowing, though not over-clean finger, at her. "You do not understand the craft of Peter. There is nothing Monsieur Gordon likes better than an excuse for being in the office when he is not expected. It is true, is it not, Peter?"

"Of course it is. Archy loves sticking out his chest and saying: 'In the office all Saturday afternoon, my boy, holding the fort,' though what fort or why hold it, nobody knows." Peter scowled at some harmless racegoers who were crossing the lawn to the stands for the second race. "If Archy could, he'd carry the White Man's burden around on his back to prove he does something for a living."

"Peter! Don't sound so bitter."

"I'm not bitter, Primrose. It's just I've had enough of Archy's masterly inactivity."

Henri was uncomfortable. If only Primrose would go and watch the next race, he could speak frankly to Peter. But Primrose showed no sign of moving.

"And what has The Tribe to say? Perhaps he would not like this either."

"The Tribe hasn't said anything. He hasn't had the chance. He's been away all week."

Henri looked thoughtful.

"And when will he see the despatch?"

"He won't. If Archy signed it yesterday, it'll have gone. All The Tribe will see, will be his office copy on Monday morning."

Henri did not like the sound of this at all.

"Maybe if you asked him, The Tribe would telegraph the Inspectorate, explaining why. . ."

"Henri! You're missing the whole point." Peter spoke irritably. "I meant the despatch to go before The Tribe saw it. That was the main reason for getting Archy to sign it yesterday."

"So The Tribe will not approve?"

"I didn't say that. He's bound to approve on principle. The well ought to be bored." Peter finished his drink. "Anyway, he'll appreciate my reply. It's the sort of reply he'd have made himself to the Inspectorate, in his young days."

"So!" Henri knew that was no guarantee that The Tribe would approve of it made by someone else. "And what do you think the I.G. will do?"

"Give me my well. He can't help himself."

"Bravo, bravo!" Henri left his chair and strolled over to Primrose. If Peter would not see sense, it was his own funeral. From the other side of the stands came the shouts of the crowd, cheering the winner home. Henri thought that, like him, they were cheering from a safe place. If The Tribe did not approve of Peter's despatch, there would be trouble—a great deal of trouble—for someone. Henri disliked trouble intensely.

At his approach Babetty pulled in her tongue and stood up. Primrose spread her knees, and the bitch planted her forepaws in the proffered lap. She touched a damp nose against Primrose's cheek. Her tongue lolled out again. Primrose buried her fingers in the thick hair of the bitch's shoulders. She looked up.

"What do you think about all this, Henri?"

Henri did not reply. Primrose was only a girl and it was an awkward question.

"Forgive us, *petit chou*, we talk shop too long. Today, you are more beautiful than ever."

Primrose pulled Babetty's ears one at a time.

"Come on, Henri." Peter was determined to have an answer. "Answer the lady. All you've done so far is ask questions, or shout 'Bravo! Bravo!' not very convincingly."

Henri reddened. He was a Basque and stubborn.

"I do not think anything at all. Moreover, what I think does not matter. The Tribe is here today with Mrs. van Loon. Ask him what he thinks."

Peter shrugged his shoulders. He turned to Primrose.

"Well, if Henri won't talk, what about you?"

"I don't know what to think." Her eyes were the colour of rain, drifting in a slow curtain down a mountainside. The chestnut flecks had gone. "If good water will cure the boils, then you should ask again and again for your well, but..."

"But what? Don't you think the Inspectorate will understand what I'm after?"

"Oh yes! They'll understand you want a well."

"And they'll give me it?"

"I suppose they'll have to, but. . ."

"But what? You're full of buts, like Henri. Why not say what you think?"

"I would—if you'd let me. Good water is a good thing, but so are good manners. You aren't being very polite to anyone, and, just because you want something very badly—a well, or the Governor's Cup—is no reason for using all sorts of tricks to get it." Primrose pushed Babetty off her lap. She walked over to the shooting stick and pulled it out of the ground. All through the conversation, its vacant look had worried her.

Babetty saw a Pekinese approach a clump of pansies, a look of determination in his bulbous eyes. She strained forward on the lead, eager to investigate him. No one had anything more to say about Peter's well.

Just before five o'clock, Peter weighed in for the big race. Nature sent him for the third time to the jockeys' room. Then he joined Toogood by the rails of the saddling enclosure to watch the six entries for the Governor's Cup lead round. All of them, including Josephine, were previous winners of Kwanti point to points. Peter stood back from the rail and tightened the strings to the black silk cover of his crash cap. His cutting whip hung from his wrist.

"What are they saying in the stands now, John?"

"Just what I told you." Toogood blew a puff of smoke after Josephine's retreating quarters. "Everyone is talking about the mare going out a second time. No one gives her a chance."

"No?"

"No. The ladies think you're a brute to ride a tired horse. The men think you're mad."

"They do, do they? Maybe they'll change their minds after the race." Peter swallowed. His mouth was dry and his stomach stuck to his backbone. He was listening for the ring-master's 'Get mounted, gentlemen, please!' "Anyway, let them think what they like." He tightened the strap behind his breeches. "But let me tell you something, John. Riding as I mean to ride, there're only two ponies who'll be with me, when I bring Josephine out of the country onto the

Toogood rolled his cheroot from one corner of his mouth to the other. He did not want to talk.

Primrose and Henri were further down the rails. Henri wanted to join Peter, but Primrose would not.

"I don't want to drive John away a second time."

"But, mon dieu. . . !"

"You go, if you want to. I'm going to stay here." She had visited Josephine in her stable an hour ago, but the Indian syce had been surly and ill at ease. It was obvious he wanted rid of her. She saw The Tribe and Esther cross the lawn.

John Toogood saw them too, and moved away.

As she came up, Esther smiled at Peter out of her green eyes. Even in sunlight the lids were shadowy and full.

"Well, here you are at last. Tony and I have been looking for you everywhere."

Esther wore a green hat and a green sweater, held in place by a thin leather belt. Her tweed skirt was brief and there was a slit in it. What the sweater suggested to the observing male, the slit emphasised. Esther stuck her shooting stick into the ground and sat down, spreading her legs generously. One knee came out of the slit, sure of its welcome.

"Yes, Esther, here he is, run to earth at last." The Tribe stood beside her, a great question mark of a man, his eyes lively and noticing. Something about Peter obviously amused him. "And here we are, just in time to find out what he's scheming to do next." Plainly The Tribe expected to find Peter's schemes, whatever they were, vastly entertaining.

"Scheming, sir ?"

"Of course. You know what I mean by schemes—someone else's plans."

"What sort of schemes ?" Peter spoke with feigned unconcern. The only way for a pigeon to avoid the stoop of a peregrine, is to fly close to the ground.

"All sorts. For instance, you began today with a scheme for not winning the first race."

Peter winced.

"Not, perhaps, a scheme the unsuspecting punter appreciated at the time, but one we enjoy in retrospect. Don't we, Esther ?" He glanced down.

"Yes, Tony."

"So now, we can't make up our minds about the big race till we've consulted Peter ?"

"No, Tony." Esther watched the peregrine swoop on

the doomed pigeon without greatly enjoying the spectacle.

"Certainly not till we find out if, this time, Peter is riding to win." The Tribe's eyes were bright like a bird's.

"Oh yes, I'm riding to win." Peter could answer that cheerfully enough.

"And you will win?"

"I think so."

"I see." The Tribe looked into his pork pie hat as if he was crystal gazing. "I thought Jan Stewer was a hot favourite and Lady Turpin's chestnut mare likely to be second?"

"They're good ponies."

"And their jockeys?"

"Ned P-J is a hard man to beat, and Snip Pritchard knows how to nurse his mount. Also he owns the other half of Polly Flinders. They'll get their ponies round."

"But still you can beat them, even though your mare's been out already?"

"I think so."

"How?"

"Yes, Peter." Esther chimed in. "How?"

"I have a plan."

"You see." The Tribe pretended to be childishly pleased with his cleverness. "Tell us your plan, Peter."

"Yes, Peter, do!" Esther looked at him out of her green eyes as if he was a harmless lunatic.

"It would take too long." Peter glanced at the ring-master and back at Esther. "I doubt if there's time."

"Nonsense, Peter!" Esther smiled. "Of course there is."

The Tribe nodded.

"And don't forget my pocket has suffered once already from ignorance of your—ah—plans."

"Well, the gist of it is this. There are two critical corners in the race. Both are left-handed. One is round the farm-house at the bottom of the steep hill. One is just after we cross the road, round the rail onto the steeplechase course. The field is sure to swing wide at the farm-house corner, maybeat both. Josephine is trained to cut them to the bone." Peter did not think it necessary to mention the drink he had mixed, or the honey from the white jar.

"I see." The Tribe patted his bald spot. "It might work—if your mare can stay." He nodded. "Cutting your corners fine. It's a good method—so long as you don't

cut 'em too fine. It's the big race. You're on a good horse. The question is : are you on the right one ? " He turned to Esther. " My dear, I've learned all I can here. Time I made our bet, a biggish one. We have leeway to make up on our Peter. Lots of leeway." As he moved away, he added. " Keep him amused for me, till I come back." He set off in the direction of the jockeys' room. Betting was in the public enclosure—in the opposite direction.

Peter was about to call after him, but The Tribe stopped to speak to Henri. At the same time Esther looked up.

" Well, Peter, dear ? "

" Yes ? " He looked down. Under her sweater the contours were plumply visible. " That's a pretty sweater."

" I'm glad you like it." Esther nearly said ' them '. " Tell me, Peter dear, just why are you so pig-headed ? "

" Pig-headed ? Me ? " Peter licked his lips. " Why, what's the matter now ? "

" I told you, you couldn't ignore Tony didn't I ? "

" Yes you did."

" Well, why don't you listen to what I say ? "

" I do."

" You don't. You are ignoring Tony. You can't do it. Not and get away with it."

Peter opened his mouth to protest, but he shut it again. He was by nature honest with himself. What she had said was less than the truth. He had not only ignored The Tribe. He had schemed to outwit him.

" You mustn't do it, Peter. Really, you mustn't." She sighed. " You know, Peter, you go about the world in a sort of watertight compartment, behaving as if Tony didn't exist. He does. He's very much alive. And he knows far more than you give him credit for."

" I'm sure he does."

" Then show some signs of appreciating it. If you go on as you're doing, you'll end in trouble."

" You mean in Wuchow."

Esther did not bother to reply.

Peter licked his lips, tapping his riding boot with his whip. He tightened the strap of his breeches another inch. His middle had gone to nothing. He began to pull on his string gloves. The hard jangle of the bell made his heart miss a beat.

" Get mounted, gentlemen, please." The ring-master spoke quietly, but the sentence had about it a strange urgency.

Peter ducked under the rails, pressing his cap down on his head.

"Good luck, Peter." Esther sat where she was, looking after him.

Peter gathered the reins, patted the mare's neck, and as Abbas Khan bore down on the offside stirrup, swung himself into the saddle. He stooped to test the girths, and through the thin racing saddle, he felt the mare's ribs and the power of running in her. She pranced sideways, tossing her head and playing with her bit. Her quarters touched the rail.

The Tribe was back. He looked at Josephine, and then at Peter.

"It's a good scheme, Peter. Unfortunately for you, you're on the wrong horse again."

"Again?"

"Afraid so." The Tribe waved. "I'll see you after the race."

Peter leaned over Josephine's arching neck.

"Right or wrong, my money's on her to win."

The Tribe lifted his hat.

Toogood waited by a gap in the rails.

"It's only a race, old son. Don't go breaking your neck."

"Don't worry. I shan't." He stood up in his stirrups and looked down at the mare's dancing forefeet. "All the same, John, I mean to win. That'll show The Tribe which is the right horse." He followed the rest of the field out of the ring.

"The last shall be first—I hope." Tom Backhouse stood beside the Governor. "I've backed you to win, Peter. You'll pay a packet if you do."

"Oh Tom! You shouldn't have." Mary ffenel-Jones sat on her shooting stick in front of him, her chest stuck out in hopeful imitation of 'that missionary woman from Wuchow'. "Peter was last before. He'll be last again. That is, if poor Josephine doesn't drop dead half way round."

Primrose was by herself at the end of the lawn. There was a hedge of sweet-peas behind her.

"Are you going to win, Peter?"

"Yes, I think so. Yes, I am."

They tittupped out of the course, over the road, on to the paddy fields. The second rice crop had been harvested long ago. Clumps of old stubble pockmarked the dried mud with a criss-cross pattern, that made each field look like a giant waffle. In the spring the farmers would come with their

crude ploughs and slow water buffaloes, to turn the heavy soil for the first rice crop of the new year. A mile away across the fields, were the foothills.

Alec Tinker waited on his bay gelding by the starting flags. They jostled towards him in an irregular line. Peter edged to the left. A few yards from the flags, Alec held up his hand.

"That'll do." He stood up in his stirrups. "No need to tell you chaps the way. It's the left-hand course. Over the paddy, through the foothills, down the hill, sharp left at the farm-house, back across the paddy, over three hurdles, across the road, left again onto the steeplechase course, three jumps and you're home."

Peter heard Snip mutter :

"I hope there's enough straw on that bloody road. There bloody well never is."

Alec held a handkerchief above his head. Out of the corner of his eye, Peter watched Snip's black and white hoops on Polly Flinders, and, beyond him, red and white polka dots that must be Ned Parker-Jervis on the favourite. He scarcely heard what Alec said.

"The course is marked with flags. Keep them on their right sides. Red on the left; white right." Alec paused. "Remember, white right." The handkerchief dropped. "You're off."

Josephine reared, and went away with her head up, tugging at the reins. She brushed the first bamboo pole and Peter saw a flash of red. He steadied her up a paddy bund. Beyond it, there was another. She stood back and jumped with her forehand well out.

The pace slackened, but Peter held on. There were more paddy bunds, with tricky irrigation ditches down the middle of them, and then a wide brook. Two fields beyond the brook, they reached the big grass bank at the end of the paddy. From there a narrow path winds up into the foothills. Coming to the bank, Peter hit the mare once. He led onto the path.

Twice in the next mile, the pony behind tried to pass. Each time Peter touched Josephine and she lengthened her stride. The pony dropped back, and Josephine slowed down. China ponies do not like passing, nor being passed, on a path. Pushing and shoving is not a Chinese characteristic. Peter had counted on that, and on the honey. But he wondered how long it would be before someone realised that the race was being run at a false pace.

Peter's mind went back to The Tribe. Why was Josephine the wrong horse? And why again? Why did The Tribe want to see him after the race, and what about? He watched the ground rush steadily under him. The Tribe was a queer bird, and Primrose had not been encouraging. She might, at least, have said she hoped he would win.

The path bore away to the right and Peter's mind went back to the race. He held Josephine round a red flag, off the path and set her at the steep slope that rose in front, its crest marked by two bamboo poles ten yards apart. From the top of the hill they would be in full view of the course again. Behind, the field galloped hard. From the crest the ground dropped steeply away to the farm-house, its white-washed wall marked with a red flag. Josephine checked and the pony behind bumped into her. There was a scramble. Someone said:

"Christ!" And a bamboo pole was knocked askew.

The field poured helter-skelter down the hill, the pony, which had bumped Josephine, leading.

Half way down, Snip's hoops shot past on Polly Flinders, followed by Ned's polka dots. Jan Stewer had his ears back. Near the bottom of the hill, the two remaining ponies caught up. They were out of control and fighting for their heads. Ned heard them and glanced back. He saw the danger and cursed their jockeys. He tried to steady the black entire, but Jan Stewer showed the whites of his eyes and held on. The two ponies pushed him out, and the whole field swung wide at the turn.

Peter held Josephine against the slope and she cut the farm-house corner so fine that the wall brushed his knee. But he did not notice that. He had gained on the turn. Clear of the farm-house Josephine was lying fourth. There was nothing now but coarse grass and paddy until the three hurdles before the road.

Peter's mouth set in a thin line. He sat down in the saddle. The mare stretched under him, galloping like a fresh horse, her ears pricked, her head steady. She flew three paddy bunds in quick succession. The wind roared in his ears. Lumps of mud flew past his head. One hit him in the face, but he did not feel it. The pony in front slipped back. He saw Ned's polka dots again and Snip's hoops and the flying hind quarters of their ponies. He was conscious of nothing but the need to pass them and win.

Peter took the first hurdle behind the leaders. He edged

over and took the next, close in to the left. Ned heard Josephine's pounding hooves and glanced over his shoulder, sweat in dusty wet lines on his cheeks, his mouth open.

"Christ, Snip, here's Peter. I thought we'd lost the sod down the hill."

Snip did not answer. He was a length ahead. He took the last hurdle in the middle.

Ned and Peter jumped it on the left. Both had their whips out. Josephine jumped bigger and, coming to the road, her nose was level with Jan Stewer's girth. Peter saw the covering of rice straw on the road and he set Josephine to cross it at an angle. He drove his knees into her. He must reach the corner round the rails first. Josephine would face the steeplechase jumps neck-and-neck with the leaders. She was the better jumper. His throat contracted with excitement. It had worked. There was nothing to stop him now.

Through the straw, Josephine's hooves rang on the road. The black stallion heard her coming and swung his head. Ned gritted his teeth.

"God damn it, no!" His whip rose and fell. "Not a second time."

Josephine flung herself at the narrowing gap. There was too little straw on the road. Her hind feet slipped and she all but fell. Jan Stewer reached the corner and went round on the rails Josephine at his heels. There was no room between the mare's body and the top rail. Peter was unsighted. He saw the danger too late and tried to kick his foot clear, but the rail caught the toe of his boot and tossed him out of the saddle. He saw Ned crouching over the neck of his pony, the back of his scarlet cap and his shirt blown fat by the wind. Then he hit the short grass of the steeplechase course. His cap saved him. He hung on savagely to the reins.

Josephine dragged him for ten yards, swung round and stood, trembling. He was on his feet before he knew he had been down. He flung his body across the saddle. Josephine swerved, her head went up and she galloped at the first jump. He took it with his reins loose, and his stirrups flying. As he landed, the two leaders rose to the next. He gathered Josephine and she began to gain. But she was a dozen lengths behind. Dizzy and sick from his fall, Peter eased up to watch Ned and Snip fight out the finish. The crowd along the rails went past. He saw Toogood, leaning far out, waving his

hat, his mouth open. Primrose stood motionless on a chair. The judges' box came and went. He had finished third. He caught the others at the end of the course. Both their ponies were blowing through wide, distended nostrils.

Ned turned Jan Stewer.

"What happened to you, Peter? I saw you close up as we crossed the road."

"I came down at the turn." Peter was white and shaken.

"Bad luck." Ned trotted on.

Peter waited for Snip.

"Who won?"

"He did." Snip nodded after Ned. "By half a length. It was a hell of a finish, but Jan Stewer was on the inside at the turn and that did it. Polly had nothing left." He patted the mare's sweat-soaked neck.

They rode in behind the judges' box, Jan Stewer in front, Polly Flinders next. Abbas Khan took Josephine's rein. Toogood walked on the off side.

"Well run, Josephine." He patted her affectionately. "Well run!" He looked up at Peter.

Peter stared straight ahead. No one knew he had been down. He did not feel like telling anyone. It had been his own fault.

Lady Turpin took Polly Flinders' rein. Peter heard her say,

"Well, ridden, Snip. It was awfully close. I'm afraid your half didn't run fast enough."

Peter looked to see who was leading in the winner. Jan Stewer's mafoo was there, and, on the off side walking by the pony's head, Peter could see a woman carrying a shooting stick.

There was a burst of applause.

"Good old Jan Stewer!"

"Jolly good race!"

"Splendid finish! Well ridden, Ned!"

"Give him the cup for keeps!"

A tall man, wearing a pork pie hat, dropped into step beside the woman. There was another burst of applause, louder this time and the tall man raised his hat. Peter stared at a bald patch. He sat up, shaking his head to get the mist out of his eyes. The man was The Tribe. The woman, leading in the winner of the Governor's Cup, was Esther.

Peter dismounted behind the members' stand and weighed out. Abbas Khan led Josephine away. Pony and syce

walked with their heads down. Peter fetched his top coat from the jockeys' room and crossed the lawn towards the bar. The Tribe was waiting for him.

"Well ridden, Peter. In fact, damn well ridden, after that fall."

"You saw me come down?"

"I was by the rail at the turn."

"I see." Peter nodded dully. "I suppose you warned Ned before the race?"

The Tribe pulled his big nose.

"What do you think?"

Peter looked at the flags, blowing out from the top of the matchsh grandstand, their colours bright against the clean sky.

"Have you owned Jan Stewer long?"

"Not long. He came into the market a month ago, and as he was the right horse for the Governor's Cup, I bought him. Or rather, Esther and I and old T.L. bought him."

"T.L. Chuang? I see. That's why you call your stable 'We Three'."

The Tribe nodded.

"Good name, don't you think?"

"And that's why, from your point of view, Josephine was the wrong horse?"

"So she was—from my point of view." He paused. "I'd have offered you the ride, only you aren't ready to ride for me."

"Why ever not?"

"Don't you know?" The Tribe shook his head. "You amaze me." He took off his hat and caressed the top of his head with his finger-tips. "Perhaps I should explain. I called at the office before coming out here. My office copy of your despatch was on my desk."

"Your office copy? Then the original's gone?"

"Yes—before I could stop it."

"Why should you want to stop it? Don't you think I'll get my well?"

"Oh yes, you'll get your well." One eyebrow arched cynically. "Oh how you'll get your well! But what good is your well to you? And, what's much more important, what good is it to me?"

"I thought you'd be impressed if I found a cure for Mirs Bay boils."

"Did you? Why should I be? A cure for boils may

improve our junk control but. . . ." He paused. "You're on the wrong horse again."

Peter dug his heel into the grass.

"I see. Wrong horse again."

The Tribe moved towards the bar.

"Besides, Peter, how can your despatch help you to the Hongkong Deputy's job? It won't please the Inspectorate. The more right you are, the less they'll be pleased. Damn it, even you must see that."

"I suppose I do—now."

"Pity you didn't see it sooner. It's a good idea to try and please the right people."

"I did try to please the Sha-ü-chung villagers. I went to a lot of trouble to get the *feng shui* man to site the well. And a lot of unnecessary bobbery I had over getting him."

"So I heard." The Tribe looked beyond Peter towards the public enclosure, where Esther had gone to collect their winnings. "I wondered, at the time, why you worried about the villagers. They were about as important as the poor punter." He looked at Peter, the eyebrow still up. "You haven't worried much about the poor punter today, have you, Peter?"

Peter did not reply.

They had crossed the lawn to the matshed bar. At the entrance The Tribe paused to glance again at the crowd round the pay-out window.

"You may have tried to please the villagers, but what about the Taipeng magistrate? He wasn't exactly enthusiastic about your well."

Peter stared.

"I don't understand." He passed a hand over his eyes. "I don't understand, sir." He steadied himself against a pole that supported the palm leaf roof of the matshed. The eyes on either side of the big nose were bright and predatory. "How do you know about the Taipeng magistrate? I didn't mention him in either despatch. He didn't seem important to me. I didn't even see how he fitted in. How do you know. . . ?"

"How should I not know?" The Tribe's voice was soft and explanatory. It was not gentle. "Am I not likely to know about any dealings the Customs has with T.L.'s elder brother?"

"Maybe it's the fall. Maybe I've lost my wits. But what in the name of God has T.L.'s elder brother—whoever

he may be—got to do with the Taipeng magistrate?"

"T.L.'s elder brother is the Taipeng magistrate."

"Wha-at!" Peter stammered. "The old boy who draws the maps?"

"Of course. Cartographer Chuang. Surely you knew that?"

Peter stared.

"I see! By God, yes—I see. For the first time for weeks further than the end of my nose. Cartographer Chuang—T.L.'s elder brother—he wouldn't be interested in helping the junks."

"Of course not. After all the Cartographer can't draw maps of the junk routes. Or, anyway, he doesn't. But he can draw maps of the roads to his heart's content."

"Yes. And as Taipeng magistrate he can look after younger brother's business interests. And very well he does it." Peter paused. "I've been living in a watertight compartment all right. Thinking no one but myself existed."

"I wouldn't say that." The Tribe's eyes were cold. "Your scheme for getting your despatch signed and sent off before I saw it, included, or should I say, excluded me." He stroked his head. "A pity, Peter, when you saw the right people were against this well of yours, you didn't drop it in the first place." He sighed. "'Fraid it's too late now."

"Too late?" Peter's mouth was dry. "What does that mean exactly?"

The Tribe did not reply at once.

"What does it mean? It means that you'll get your well. But you've put people's backs up and you've tried to outwit me. I don't like that at all. So!" He gave his head a final pat. "So I expect you'll have to cool your heels up country for a bit."

"Up country!" Peter drew in his breath. "Where?"

"Where?" The Tribe watched Esther cross the lawn, tucking a sheaf of notes into her hand-bag. "I can't say—off hand. You'll be rusticated. I expect they still called it that when you were up at New College. However..." He turned to Esther. "If you must rusticate, I'll see you rusticate in good company."

"Come on, Peter." Esther slipped an arm through his, her eyes green and inviting. "You need a drink after that fall. Tony'll buy us all drinks. He's rolling. He made a scandalous amount of money out of that race. Of course, he backed Jan Stewer to win, but, like the clever fellow he is,

he put far more on Josephine to place. And she paid a packet." Esther went into the matshed in front of them.

As they turned to the bar for drinks, Peter wandered to the side, too shaken to speak to anyone. He saw Babetty and then Primrose, sitting by herself, and went over. She looked up, but did not speak.

"Aren't you going to say you're sorry I didn't win?"

She shook her head. Her eyes were grey and wet.

"Maybe, Peter, it was better for you to lose." She bent down and scratched Babetty's ear.

CHAPTER FIVE

The North-East monsoon blew down Hongkong harbour and whipped across the pier, cold wet and heavy with the smell of the sea. The S.S. *Tai Ming*, her name in Chinese characters down her funnel, sounded three short blasts on her whistle and moved slowly astern. The wind caught the vanishing steam and swept it away. Swirls of smoke blew along the praya and over the roof tops. Peter and Primrose leaned over the rail and waved. The Tribe and Frost, with John Toogood further along the pier towards the sea, waved back. The few Chinese clerks, come from his office to bid Peter farewell, joined in.

The clerks, as befitted juniors, had arrived first. They had huddled unhappily together, holding on their hats, their long gowns flapping about their ankles. Every now and again they were enveloped in choking clouds of smoke. They were cold and wet and depressed by the not-to-be-disguised discourtesy of their scant numbers.

The arrival of Mr. Frost and Mr. Toogood cheered them. Later Mr. Tribe hurried along the pier in time to speak to Mr. Yule by the gangway. He handed him a letter. No doubt a note of personal recommendation to the Commissioner of Customs at Wuchow. One of the clerks, standing closer than the others, learnt that the foreign missy, who was plainly, if immodestly, travelling with Mr. Yule, was the only daughter of the *Ying Kuo Ling Shih Kuan* in the City of Rams. She had chosen to return to her father, the Consul-General in Canton, by river-steamer and rail—an unusual and circuitous route—for the pleasure of Mr. Yule's company. It was

evident that Mr. Yule knew, and was known by, the right people. The clerks, who had stayed away, because his transfer to Wuchow had been sudden and unseasonable, would pause when they heard this. They would speak at length of the inclemency of the weather and of the mountains of work which the near approach of China New Year had piled on their desks. Their many words would deceive no one. The truth needs few.

The spirits of the clerks on the pier rose. Not only did Mr. Yule know the right people. He was a good hand, and inside, his heart was good. Had he not, in spite of opposition from the Inspectorate, obtained permission for the new well at Sha-ü-chung, so that the staff there might benefit from good water? The Preventive Deputy's job in Hongkong was still to be filled. As everyone knew, Mr. Tribe had the filling of it. If Mr. Yule returned to Hongkong as Preventive Deputy, the clerks who had failed to come to his farewell would have been as unwise as they had been discourteous.

The clerks on the pier waved their hats in unison, calling across the widening strip of choppy water :

"Good-bye, Mr. Yule."

"*Ts'ai chien, Yu hsien sheng.*"

"See you soon again, sir."

They turned away and followed their superiors off the pier. As they climbed into waiting rickshas, the wind blew the clouds apart and the harbour glistened in the wet sunshine. In the office they would mention that the sun had shone on Mr. Yule's going. They would not forget to hint that he might return.

The *Tai Ming* cleared the pier. Down in her engine room the telegraph rang once and once again. Slowly she moved forward, answering the helm. The island of Hongkong swung into line on her port side. Peter stood by the ship's rail, watching it slip away from him.

Beside him, Primrose suppressed the innocent exuberance of her tweed skirt.

"It was nice of The Tribe to come and see you off."

"Yes it was." Her legs were nice too. "It pleased my clerks."

"Did he have much to say?"

"Not much. There wasn't much time. Just a few hints about my future behaviour." Peter did not think it necessary to mention that the letter The Tribe had given him was addressed to Esther van Loon.

There was no need. Primrose had guessed that for herself. She pushed the thought of it away.

"I'm glad John Toogood came. He likes you very much, doesn't he?"

"Yes, I think he does." Peter smiled. "He likes you, too."

"He doesn't know me."

"No, but old John has eyes in his head. He likes what he's seen."

Primrose smiled, but she wished that wretched letter was not in Peter's pocket. Still, she had twenty-four hours before the *Tai Ming* reached Samshui. She meant to make the most of them. The *Tai Ming* headed down the harbour towards Kap Sui Men, the gateway to the Delta and the West River. The island of Hongkong dropped behind. The wind blew her hair across her cheek.

"How do you feel now, Peter, about your transfer to Wuchow?"

"All right, I suppose. The telegram on the old man's desk so soon after Kwanti—'Yule to Wuchow'—was a bit of a shock."

"I'm sure it was. You looked a bit upset when I saw you at The Grips." The Grips is slang for the Hongkong hotel. No one knows its derivation, though there are many interpretations; fanciful, coarse or libellous, according to the size of the interpreter's hotel bill.

"Did I? I'm not surprised. Anyway, you were very comforting. And it's very sporting of you to travel this way to Canton." He looked at her slim figure. "Your Dad won't object?"

"Don't be so early Victorian, Peter! Why should Christopher object? Besides, I've never been this way before. It's fun." She turned her face to the wind. "I only wish you weren't leaving Hongkong."

"Wuchow isn't so far away. Besides, after Kwanti, I knew I'd be transferred."

"Mr. Tribe didn't approve of your well?"

"Nobody—nobody that matters, did."

"I am sorry."

"It can't be helped. There is one thing. The well's going to be bored."

"Is it? Who's going to bore it?"

"A firm that calls itself 'The Kowloon Deep Well Boring and Construction Company'."

"Is it a big company?"

"I don't know. All I know is their manager is a White Russian called Ignatief."

"What's he like?"

He smiled at her inquisitiveness.

"He's a thin pale fellow, with thin pale hair and thin pale clothes."

She laughed.

"He doesn't sound like the manager of anything, specially not of a company with such a grand name."

"If it comes to that, he doesn't look like the manager of anything. Personally, I don't believe there is such a thing as a deep well in Kowloon. If there is, it's full of sea water."

"It all sounds very queer to me." She held onto the rail, letting the wind's strong fingers pluck at her.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, it's not my pidgin, anymore." He looked back at The Peak. "I have other fish to fry."

"What other fish, Peter?"

He leaned over the rail and gazed down at the green water.

"I'm going to Wuchow—but not to stay. Not if I can help it."

"How are you going to get out?"

"Get myself favourable notice over anti-smuggling work, and get transferred again."

"Where to?"

"Back to Hongkong—if I can—to the Preventive Deputy's job."

"Oh! I hope you do." She remembered the letter in his pocket. "You're sure you won't like Wuchow once you're there. I've heard..."

"I know." He nodded grimly. "You've heard the snipe shooting is good. Is there any God forsaken hole in China where the snipe shooting isn't good—according to the people who don't have to live there? I didn't come to China to shoot snipe."

"What did you come to China for?" The chestnut flecks in her eyes were very plain.

"Not the question, at the moment. The question is—how am I to get out of Wuchow?"

"And the answer to that?"

"We'll have to wait and see. But, right from the start, I mean to keep my eyes open."

She pulled her felt hat down over her fair hair.

"Let's walk on the other side."

"It'll be windier."

"I like the wind blowing me about."

Peter looked at her and thought probably the North Wind liked it too.

They crossed by the after alleyway. Peter dropped into step beside her. The *Tai Ming* was abreast Lap Sap Wan—Gin Drinkers' Bay. Kap Sui Men lay ahead.

A Boy came down the companion from the next deck.

"Customs master?"

"Yes, No. 1. What is it?"

"Captain Browne sends compliments. Will master 'n missy go top side?"

Primrose looked inquiringly at Peter.

"Who did he say wanted us?"

"Old Charlie Browne, skipper of the *Tai Ming*. He wants company on his bridge."

"Of course. I remember. The *Tai Ming's* called Charlie Browne's West River Yacht, isn't she?"

"That's right. Most popular ship on the river."

Primrose said nothing. She knew scandal had it that Esther van Loon travelled free on the *Tai Ming*. No one knew why. Certainly, she travelled between Wuchow and Hongkong more often than a missionary's wife could normally afford. Perhaps the scandal had no other foundation.

"Let's go and visit Charlie." Peter walked on ahead.

"He's a character, if a pathetic one."

"Pathetic?"

"In a way." He followed close behind her up the companion, knowing the draught would be too strong for her skirts. "However, if you notice anything unusual, ignore it. Charlie's feelings are easily hurt."

"Of course." She looked round. "But what am I likely to notice—and if there's something he doesn't want us to see, why ask us onto his bridge?"

"You're full of questions. On you go." He prodded her gently up the steps.

On the deck above, a wicket gate led onto an enclosed bridge. A barefoot sailor was at the wheel. A heavily built Chinese in a frogged jacket and wide trousers stood over on the port side, staring ahead. He was a big man with a square jaw and weathered skin. He wore cloth slippers and a felt hat.

Captain Browne stood by the binnacle. As they came on the bridge, he spoke firmly to the helmsman.

"Hold her at that!"

The helmsman did not answer. Kap Sui Men lay straight ahead.

Captain Browne nodded in their direction, but his attention was fixed on the narrow gateway towards which the ship steamed.

The captain of the *Tai Ming* was white-headed and tiny. He had a pink face, and his hands were pale and freckled. The rims of his eyes were slack and watered. He was sixty-three and looked seventy. His uniform, like all his clothes, hung loosely on him. He was a new arrival on the China coast. Till his sixtieth year he had been master of a British tramp plying between Port Said, Alexandria, Suda Bay and the Piraeus. He had appeared suddenly in the Far East, his master's ticket intact, but with nothing else to show, except a photograph of a beautiful woman and two beautiful children. Charlie Browne never spoke of the days when the Eastern Mediterranean and the sea road between Egypt and Greece had been his oyster. He did not smoke and he drank little.

They stood watching Kap Sui Men open out. The *Tai Ming* hugged the north shore. She passed close under a white-washed light station. Twice Charlie strode to the port side, slid back the window and stared out. Each time, he had to walk round the stolid figure of the big Chinese, and so far as Primrose could see, there was nothing to stare at. In ten minutes Kap Sui Men was behind and open water lay ahead all the way to Lintin.

Charlie Browne glanced at the compass.

"Course west by north."

"West by north." The helmsman answered, but he glanced across the bridge, and the wheel did not move.

Captain Browne stepped back.

"How d'ye do, Miss Gartrell. Glad to have you on my bridge." He smiled. "Gives my passengers confidence, seeing me on the job."

Primrose smiled back. She had steered a launch through Kap Sui Men herself, on the way to Castle Peak to swim. There was a tide, but so far as she knew, no other difficulty.

Charlie turned to Peter.

"And anyone from the Customs is doubly welcome. Never been any trouble between Charlie Browne and the Customs. Never any trouble at all." He strolled over to the compass.

From where she stood, Primrose could see the compass.

The needle pointed south of west. Charlie saw it too. He glanced over at the port side and walked back, plucking nervously at a button, his uniform bigger on him than ever.

"Well!" He looked at Primrose. "I'm afraid I must hustle you off. Navigation between Lintin and the Fan Si Ack rocks is tricky. We pass them just on dusk." He nodded at the taciturn bulk on the other side of the bridge. "My pilot there, positively enjoys mistaking the Fan Si Acks for fishing junks and trying to run 'em down!" Captain Browne smiled at his conceit. "But don't you worry, Miss Gartrell. I'm here to keep an eye on him." He drove them gently towards the wicket gate. "Of course, you'll come and have a cocktail in my cabin before dinner."

"Thank you very much, Captain Browne, we'd love to." Primrose smiled at the weak eyes.

Back on the saloon deck they strolled up and down watching the light fade. The wind had died, and in the sky the evening star hung like a lamp from an unseen thread.

Peter went to the rail to watch the western slope of Castle Peak colour in the setting sun.

"It's going to be decent weather after all. No moon, of course—with China New Year so close."

"I didn't know you were a weather prophet!" Primrose joined him at the rail. "Of course it's going to be good weather. It has to be for China New Year."

"Why has to be?"

"It's China's August bank holiday."

"Maybe it is. Only it's lunar and in the spring."

"It's the only real holiday four hundred million people ever have. God couldn't let it be wet."

"I hope God understands."

"Of course he does." Primrose put her arm through his.

"Peter, you said, if I noticed anything unusual on the bridge, I was to ignore it."

He nodded.

"Can I ask a question?"

"Of course."

"What was going on up there? The sailor at the wheel paid no attention to Captain Browne. And the man he called his pilot! He looked more like a bailiff."

"That's how he looks to Charlie."

"What does it mean?"

"It means this. The *Tai Ming* is a British ship, carrying passengers out of a British port, so according to Hongkong

Harbour Regulations, she has to carry a captain with a master's ticket."

"So that's why Charlie Browne is here?"

"That's the only reason he's here. The real boss is the pilot. Charlie need never go on the bridge at all. In fact the owner'd just as soon he stayed in his cabin and drank gin—like other West River skippers."

"Who's the owner?"

"You know."

Primrose shook her head.

"Of course you know. T. L. Chuang. He owns this ship and the *Tai Hing*, her sister ship. Calls himself The Wuchow Steam Navigation Company!"

"Isn't it rather a grand name for a company with only two ships?" She paused. "Still, Charlie does go on the bridge."

"Because, more than anything else, Charlie Browne wants to show he is still master of a British ship." Peter watched Castle Peak and the hills behind Deep Bay grow dark. He wondered about Charlie Browne. All the drugs in the world pass sometime or other between Egypt and Greece.

Primrose interrupted his thoughts.

"I see now why you said he was pathetic."

"He is pathetic." Peter shook his head. "Charlie never says anything about the past. All that matters to him is keeping up the pretence that he's still master of a ship flying the old red duster, when he's really nothing but a Board of Trade ticket!"

"It sounds horrid."

"It's typical of the West River. Which, incidentally, makes me all the more determined to get out of Wuchow the first chance I get."

They leaned over the ship's rail. The hogback of Lintin stood out black against the sky. There are broken tombstones of British sailors on Lintin, and when the moon is dark, spectres of opium clippers ride at anchor under the lee of the island, waiting for the junks of the Canton Hoppon to creep out from Bocca Tigris for the contraband.

"Captain Browne is pathetic." Primrose glanced at Peter. "But he's odd too. The whole ship is odd. That queer pilot and the dumb insolence of the sailor at the wheel. I wonder . . ."

"Ghosts!" Peter laughed. "Lintin ghosts. It's getting dark and you're seeing things."

"Maybe." She stood away from the rail. "Anyway, it's time I had a bath and made myself beautiful. I suppose there's a bath on board?"

"Of course. I'll show you." On the way to her cabin he pointed to the bathroom. "I'll bath after you. Don't pinch all the hot water."

When he bathed, the bathroom smelt of her. He changed and strolled on deck. She joined him wearing a dark frock which did justice to her figure and contrasted with her honey coloured hair.

"I feel fresh and clean." She took his hand. "And now I'd like a gin, please."

"Charlie'll give you a gin." He moved towards the companion. "But, don't forget. Pay no attention, when he explains how necessary he is on the bridge. He's sure to."

The cabin door was open and Captain Browne was at his desk. A Dorothy Wilding photograph of a fair woman with two fair boys, one on either side of her, stood by his elbow. All three were beautiful. Charlie was reading a copy of *The Proceedings of the Society for Psychic Research*, and there was a row of books on psychic subjects along the top of the desk.

"Come in." Charlie stood up. "Come in and sit down. Lucky you didn't come earlier. I'm just down from the bridge." He paused. "But first, what will you drink? My Boy has put out Gordon's gin and French vermouth." He looked at Primrose.

"I'd love a gin and French, and so would Peter." She watched Captain Browne fill two glasses to the brim. "Aren't you drinking with us?"

"No, no, Miss Gartrell, if you'll excuse me. I'll be needed on the bridge again. Can't drink and work. Not if you're captain of a British ship."

"It's a shame not to be able to have just one."

"It is indeed, and really I ought to blame Mr. Yule."

"Me, Captain Browne?" Peter looked up. "What have I done?"

Charlie smiled indulgently.

"Well maybe, Miss Gartrell, instead of blaming Mr. Yule, I should blame the good relations between the *Tai Ming* and the Customs."

"I don't see why that should stop you having a drink?"

"Now, Mr. Yule!" Captain Browne leaned back ask. The sleeves of his uniform came down over

He was the Master of a British ship, relaxing

with two of his passengers. "I am explaining to Miss Gartrell." He turned to her. "You see, my dear, I'm needed on the bridge this trip more than usual—and that's saying something. And why? Why, because my chief engineer is on duty ashore, and I don't feel happy about my engines without him."

"But what has Peter—or the Customs—to do with your chief engineer being on shore?"

"Maybe Mr. Yule has nothing to do with it. But the Customs has. I've lent my Chief to them."

"What's your Chief doing for us?" Peter sipped his drink.

"He's boring a well."

"Boring a well? I hadn't heard Wuchow was having another one."

"It isn't Wuchow. Ignatief left the ship in Hongkong. I thought maybe you'd . . .?"

"Ignatief!" Peter sat up. "Ignatief? A White Russian?"

"That's right. Ruic Ignatief. He's a White Russian and a decent chap."

Peter stared, laughed, looked at Primrose and laughed again.

"I'm sorry, Captain Browne. I was being stupid. Of course, I know about that well."

"You see, Miss Gartrell, I was right." Charlie was pleased and encouraged by Peter's laughter, though he did not understand it. "I can't drink with you, because I'm needed on the bridge. And I'm needed on the bridge because the relations between the Customs and my ship are so good that they borrow my Chief to bore their well." He rubbed his fragile hands together. "They wouldn't do that, if there ever had been any smuggling on the old *Tai Ming*." He looked from one to the other. Surely these two young people must see him as the Master of a British ship.

Primrose saw only the red rims of his eyes and the two children nestling under the protecting arms of their mother.

Peter did not look up.

"Borrowed my Chief to bore their well!" He thought of the price at the bottom of the tender, submitted by The Kowloon Deep Well Boring and Construction Company.

Borrowed was not the word he would have used.

Charlie Browne moved away from his desk. He had played his part. It was time for his audience to go.

"Well, children—you really only are children to me—I hear cook has a good dinner for you, so eat hearty. I'll be on the bridge looking after you, till we pass Wangmoon into the West River."

At the door, Primrose glanced back at the woman in the photograph. Her arms could not shelter her child in exile.

Except for the soup, which was brown and tasted of sand, Captain Browne was right about the dinner. Peter drowned the taste of the soup with Magi sauce. Primrose did not eat it. They drank Tiger beer—pale thin lager from Singapore, but pleasant.

Half-way through dinner the *Tai Ming* slowed down. There were shouts and the sound of running feet.

"What's that, Peter?"

"The Wangmoon Customs search party come on board. We're in the West River now."

A little later there was more shouting.

"Is that the search party leaving?"

Peter nodded.

"Well, they didn't take long!" Primrose was not impressed.

"It's only a casual check to see that everything is on the manifest. It's meant to stop the crew chucking stuff over the side into waiting sampans."

"Does it stop them?"

Peter smiled.

"It's meant to." He watched her finish her beer. "My mother told me bad girls never drink beer."

"My mother died before she could tell me things." Her eyes twinkled at him over her glass. "But I'm not a bad girl. I'm good—much too good for you." Primrose thought of Esther and wondered if it would not be better to be a little bad. She tore the skin of a dried lichee. "Peter?"

"Yes, Primrose?"

"Why did you laugh, and look at me, and laugh again, when Captain Browne told us that Ignatief was his chief engineer? It was funny—peculiar. Not funny—ha ha!"

"It's funny both ways."

"I don't quite see..."

"You remember I told you that Charlie would explain over and over again how necessary he was on the bridge?"

"Well, so he did."

"I know. And while I was busy congratulating myself on my cleverness and scarcely listening to him, he sprang this

Ignatief business on me and I laughed because I hadn't been nearly as clever as some people."

"I still don't see . . ."

"It's quite simple. I'm transferred to Wuchow because nobody that matters likes my well. One of the people who didn't like it at all, was T. L. Chuang, and he did his best to stop it. But when he found it was going to be bored anyway . . . !"

"I see!" Primrose laughed. "He turned himself into the Kowloon Deep Well Boring and Construction Company—what lovely names he chooses—and sent his engineer to bore it for you."

"And added twenty per cent to the cost to cover the trouble I'd given him—the old rogue."

"Still you can't help laughing." Primrose giggled. "It's so Chinese."

"I did laugh. I am laughing. I bet all the stories you hear about the old scoundrel are true."

The Boy brought coffee to the table. Later, they strolled outside. The night was dark and, except for the wind of the ship's passing, still. Primrose slipped her arm through his and they walked in silence. By and by, they stopped by the ship's rail. The dark water of the West River swirled past. The spell of moving water held them. Overhead, Peter heard the lonely honk of wild geese. The wind blew a strand of hair across his face, and he caught again the scent that had lingered in the bathroom. He turned and kissed her. They walked again. By her cabin door he stopped.

"Time young things were abed."

"You mean, you're sleepy."

"A bit. It was something of a rush getting my Boy Te, my heavy gear, Babetty, and my wash amah, all safely on board."

"How like a man to put his wash amah last!"

"You should have seen old Mei Li waddling along on her lily feet. She looked like an animated firkin of beer."

"You are rude! I'm sure she's a very fine wash amah."

"So she is."

"Then you're an ungrateful wretch as well, and I shan't tell you what I was going to."

"What was that?" In the light from the cabin, he saw her pointed nose and clear eyes. The wind lifted her hair. When the *Tai Ming* heeled in the river current, she swayed like corn in the wind.

"Peter, you're not listening."

"I was thinking. You are rather beautiful."

"Well, don't sound so surprised. Christopher says I've always been beautiful—especially in my bath."

"I'm sure you're still beautiful in your bath." He kissed her other cheek. "You certainly smell nice in it."

"You don't know anything about it." She stepped back into her cabin.

"Oh yes I do."

"Well, you're to stop talking about it and listen. I really have something to tell you."

"But I thought you weren't going to."

"You don't deserve it." She leaned against the cabin door. "Still. . . ."

"What is it?" He rested one hand on the wall above her head. "Go on. Tell me."

"Don't be so conceited. It's nothing about you."

"Oh!" He took his arm away.

"And don't sound so disappointed. It's about something you said."

"What did I say?"

"You said Captain Browne would explain again and again about the need for him on the bridge, trying to make himself—and us—believe something by saying it over and over again."

"Well, so he did. You admitted that yourself at dinner."

"Peter, that wasn't the only thing Captain Browne said over and over again."

"No?" He shook his head. "I'm afraid I wasn't paying much attention to. . . ." He started. "By God! By God, Primrose, I see what you're getting at. You mean, the way he kept saying over and over again that there never had been any trouble between the Customs and the *Tai Ming* . . ."

"Or between himself and the Customs. And that there never had been any smuggling on his ship."

"Of course! Of course! Primrose, how stupid of me! That wasn't keeping my eyes open right from the start." He stared at her. "Primrose, it's a sign. And I know just what to do about it. Tomorrow morning, first thing, I'll have a look round the hold. Babetty's there and I can say I want to see her fed. After that I'll make the compradore show me the manifest."

"Can you do that?"

"Why not? I'll say I want to see if my heavy stuff has

been manifested. It probably hasn't been, and while I'm ticking him off about that, I'll have a good look at the rest of it to see if it corresponds with what I've seen in the hold."

"Oh, Peter, do. And if there's anything suspicious, tell me."

"Of course. It was your idea."

"And if anything comes of it, you'll get back to Hongkong as Preventive Deputy."

"Darling, not so fast! I haven't found anything yet. Besides, don't forget, the Wangmoon search party has been on board."

"But they only stayed two minutes." She looked up. "Peter, you will find something. I feel it in my bones. And when you do, you'll find they mean to chuck it over the side into sampans, just as you said."

"If I do, darling . . ." He kissed her. "It will be thanks to you." Her lips were soft under his.

CHAPTER SIX

PETER was up shortly after seven. The morning air was cold. He slipped into a shirt and flannels, and pulled on a sweater. As he stepped out of his cabin, Captain Browne came along the deck in a bath robe of striped Turkish towelling.

"Good-morning, Mr. Yule. I trust you slept well."

"Thanks, Captain Browne, I did." Peter glanced over the ship's rail at the distant bank of the river. "I think, if you don't mind, I'll nip down to the lower deck and have a word with my Boy. And I'd like to go into the hold and see my dog fed, if that's all right?"

"Of course. Go anywhere you like. The old *Tai Ming* is open to inspection, any time." Captain Browne went off towards the bathroom, nothing of him visible, except his scalp showing pink through his white hair, and his blue-veined feet in slippers tramped flat at the heel.

Peter made his way to the lower deck. There were Chinese deck passengers lying on cotton quilts spread over the hatch-covers, some of them still asleep. One man was sitting up scratching a sore on his leg. In a corner, a woman was nursing a child. The child sucked steadily, his eyes tight shut. There were a few coolies in the alleyway. From the half-open door of a cabin came the smell of opium. Near the steps

leading down to the hold, Peter met his *kuan shih ti*, Te.

Te was a Manchu Bannerman, slight and dark. When his hair was untidy, it parted over a scar from a knife-wound, the result of a fight in a brothel at Singapore. He was dressed in a padded cotton jacket and padded trousers. Te spoke Pekinese, grinding out its terminal 'r's' through shut teeth.

"Good-morning, Master."

"Morning, Te. Have you eaten?"

"Have eaten."

"And dog and Amah?"

"Just now eating."

"Good." Peter hesitated. "Te, I think I go into ship's hold, look see my luggage."

"Master want keys?"

"Not necessary." Peter glanced at the few coolies lounging nearby. It was unlikely that any of them understood Pekinese. But he said:

"*Hsiao i t'erh bsin*—take care," under his breath.

Te's face did not change.

"I think just now Master's dog eating."

"Good. I go look see."

Peter went down the steps. The hold was dark and smelt of fish. Babetty lay in front of her kennel, an empty plate between her paws. She cocked her ears and brushed the floor with her tail. He squatted beside her, scratching her head and letting his eyes grow accustomed to the gloom. He identified his luggage behind her kennel.

The rest of the cargo in the hold would be for Samshui, or Dohsing, the port of call between Samshui and Wuchow which the *Tai Ming* would reach a little before midnight. Certainly, none of it would be for Wuchow. They would not arrive there till the following morning. And the following morning was the first day of China New Year. The Customs would be closed, and would remain closed, for four days. No one would consign cargo to a port where it would lie unattended for the better part of a week.

Peter moved into the hold. There were plywood cases of raw rubber from Singapore; bags of polished rice from Siam—as popular with Chinese, unfortunately, as white bread is with Europeans—and bundles of cheap rubber shoes from Hongkong. In the middle of the hold were seven large baskets of third-quality salt fish, which accounted for the smell. Beyond them, a dozen big packing-cases labelled Tak Sang Cotton Weaving and Spinning Mill formed a wall across

one end of the hold. These cases contained rolls of cheap cotton piece-goods from a Chinese-owned mill in Shanghai's Yangtze Poo. Peter leaned against them and looked about. There was nothing in the hold that paid a high duty. And some things, like the rice, paid no duty at all. It was all very normal and innocent.

He strolled back to Babetty. The bitch stuck a cold nose into his hand. He held it till she grew nervous and pulled free.

"Doesn't seem to be anything wrong here, Babetty-bo."

For the first time he noticed a pile of dunnage mats beyond his luggage. He picked one up. To his surprise it was not a mat but a straw bag about eighteen inches square, which was uncommonly small for a straw bag. He turned it over. It was marked ~~was~~ the usual mark of the Wuchow Steam Navigation Company. But the paint was stickily fresh. It was pointless to paint fresh shipping marks on empty bags. Peter held the bag to the light. The straw was a greenish reed, native to Hongkong. He counted the bags. There were twenty.

He pulled one of Babetty's ears.

"Maybe, bitchee, there is something fishy here besides the smell. I wonder are these bags manifested as dunnage mats. Maybe they aren't manifested at all?"

He started up the steps out of the hold. Half-way up he hesitated, and then turned back. He walked to the far end of the hold, climbed over the Tak Sang cases and dropped in behind them. It was very dark. He groped about till his hands touched something. It was a big gunny-sack open at the top. Its contents felt like dried sausages. He knew what they were, but he took one out and held it to the light. With his penknife, he cut through the leathery black skin. The cut showed faintly white. It was becho de mer—sea slug from the Great Barrier reef—the 'coarse white, dyed black' of commerce. The dye is used to make the third quality look like the rare, highly prized, 'black spiked.' A commercial trick which deceives no one. All becho de mer pays a high duty, but third quality is scarcely worth smuggling.

His eyes grew accustomed to the dark. He counted the sacks. Then he counted them again, more slowly, touching each sack with his hands to make sure. There were twenty. That might be a coincidence. On the other hand, it might not. He ran his hands again over each sack in turn. There were twenty of them, all of them open at the top and all of

them brimful. He knew that becho de mer was usually shipped in big gunny-sacks like these from the Dutch East Indies. But why open at the top? They would be awkward to handle; and, if they were left anywhere for any length of time, they would be pilfered. Certainly, this consignment would not be for Wuchow. It was too dark to see the shipping marks.

He climbed back over the packing-cases and went up the steps out of the hold. He walked along the alleyway to the compradore's office and put his head round the door. There were two young clerks seated at a table under a closed port drinking tea. The *maipan* was at his desk. He was a fat pyramid of a man, dressed in the dark serge which the pilot wore.

"Good-morning, compradore."

"Good-morning, sir." The *maipan* wiped his shaven head with a dirty sweat rag.

"Boy and amah's tickets all right?"

"Sure thing, master, al' ri'. I pay your Boy number one good cabin." He meant, that Te had paid him, plus ten per cent for Te's Pekin accent.

"I see my dog and baggage all in one place."

"Yes sir. All in one place. I take special care for that."

"Thanks, compradore. You have entered all on manifest?"

"Oh yes. Everything on manifest, even one piece dog."

"You pay me look see?"

The face lost its enthusiasm. The two clerks stopped drinking tea, to watch. Reluctantly, the compradore produced the manifest from a drawer in front of his stomach. He put it on the desk in front of Peter.

There were only two pages. On the first, listed under Samshui, was most of the cargo Peter had seen, except the cheap rubber shoes, which were on the next page under Dohsing. At the bottom of the second page someone had added in pencil:

"One piece dog and Customs Commissioner personal effect."

Peter ignored his promotion. He guessed the entry had been made the previous night on the instructions of the Wangmoon search party.

"Compradore, you savvy. Must make entries in ink and must give number of pieces?"

"Yes, master, I savvy. All Customs rule I savvy. Only these young fellow belong makee-learn." He scowled at his

two clerks. "Las' night use pencil. Velly stupid fellow. I velly angry for this." He reached for the manifest.

"That's all right, compradore. Give me a pen. I'll fix it." As he inked over the offending entry and added the missing numbers, Peter read and re-read an entry half-way down the page under Wuchow.

"~~was~~ Bags.....third quality Becho de Mer."

There was no shipper and no consignee, and, apart from his personal effects, this was the only cargo for Wuchow.

That the mark should be the same as the mark on the straw-bags, meant nothing; but that a consignment like the one in the hold should be for Wuchow. . .! No one in their right mind would leave open bags lying about a Wuchow *p'ai* during China New Year.

Before he handed back the manifest, Peter glanced through both pages again. There was nothing about dunnage mats, and there was no other entry which would cover the small straw-bags. It was on the tip of his tongue to question the compradore, but he thought better of it. The Wangmoon search party should have noticed it. If the Samshui search party did not notice it either, he would keep it to himself. If there was anything afoot, the twenty straw-bags might have something to do with it.

"All in order now, compradore?"

"Yes, master. All ri' now."

Peter went back to his cabin. He bathed, dressed and joined Primrose in the saloon. She had finished breakfast.

"Well, lazy bones, where have you been? I've been on deck for an hour, looking at the river."

"And I've been in the ship's hold for an hour, looking at cargo." He sprinkled pepper lavishly on his bacon and eggs. "And in the compradore's office, looking though the ship's manifest."

"Oh!" She glanced at the Boy standing with his back to the sideboard. He had a flat vacant face. "Find anything?"

Peter had followed the direction of her eyes.

"I'll tell you later." He ate his breakfast and they went out on deck.

The *Tai Ming* steamed close to the river bank. The land was flat and reed-covered. Occasional palm leaf huts appeared amongst clumps of trees. Farther away the hills,

like hills on a Chinese scroll, rose steeply from the plain. The ship passed a river junk with a dirty steam launch lashed alongside, and where a creek flowed into the main river, half a dozen water buffaloes wallowed. As the ship came abreast, the animals submerged, till only their black nostrils and the backward sweep of their horns showed above water. A small boy watched them from the bank. On a sandspit a man in a pointed straw hat, naked but for a loin cloth, cast a fishing net. The net curled in the air and fell in a neat circle. The mesh slipped under and the tail rope grew taut. Despite his hat, there was a biblical simplicity about this lone fisherman.

"Well, Peter, did you find anything?"

"I don't know." Slowly, listening to himself, he told her what he had seen—"So you see—it may be nothing."

"But you don't think so."

"Maybe I don't. But what can it be? The becho de mer is third quality, just as the manifest says, and there are twenty sacks. Of course, the sacks are open, and they are too full, and they are consigned to Wuchow. It doesn't make sense, but. . ."

"What about the marks on the becho de mer sacks and on the small straw-sacks being the same—if what's on the manifest is right?"

"It's a common shipping mark."

"Isn't it an awful lot of becho de mer?"

"It's a lot of the cheap quality, maybe." He shook his head. "But I don't really think so—not before a festival, especially not before China New Year."

"But, Peter, it won't get to Wuchow in time for the New Year."

"I know." He frowned. "If it was for Samshui, or even Dohsing, I wouldn't give it another thought. But Wuchow. . .! There'll be nothing left by the time the consignee, whoever he is, comes to the *p'ai* for it."

In Wuchow, all shipping wharves are on rafts called *p'ais*. These *p'ais* are secured by anchors, and a pontoon bridge connects each to the shore. Even the Customs House is built on one. The *p'ais* rise and fall with the river.

"The bags are pretty big, aren't they?"

"Becho de mer is generally shipped in big gunny-sacks like these, mostly from the Dutch East Indies."

"What will you do?"

"Nothing—except keep my eyes open. The only thing

that is definitely wrong is the straw-bags are not on the manifest. But it's a search party's job to spot that."

"You're not satisfied."

"No, I'm not. But I don't intend to interfere; not yet anyway. For one thing, I don't want to put that old compradore on his guard."

They strolled up and down the deck in the sun. Primrose fell silent, because the end of her trip was in sight and because of the letter for Esther in Peter's pocket.

"Penny for them?" He smiled at her.

"I was wondering when I was going to see you again."

"Goodness knows—unless you come to Wuchow."

"Come to Wuchow?" She hesitated. "After all, why not? Christopher knows your new Commissioner, Paul Bartolini, ever so well. They were in Peking together, the year Charlotte died."

"She was your mother, wasn't she?"

Primrose nodded.

"She died when I was born. It took Christopher a long time to forgive me." Her eyes were sad. She stopped by the ship's rail to watch the river traffic.

"Well, why don't you and your Dad come and visit Bartolini?" He watched the sunlight catch her hair. "Come for *Ch'ing Ming*."

Ch'ing Ming is the festival of spring. It is the time of bright new green; whether it be the flaming green of young rice in China, or the less lambent green of daffodil spears, thrust up through warm English earth, to challenge the tottering dominion of winter.

"I'd love to. Spring anywhere is Heaven."

"You're a bit of spring yourself."

"And you're the sere and yellow leaf! Honestly, I wish you wouldn't talk as if you were old enough to be my father."

"I am—nearly."

"You're not. Not even if you'd begun as early as Julius Caesar with his aunt Quintilla."

"Is that the sort of thing they taught you in school?"

"Why not? Did you think I was taught to look for babies under gooseberry bushes?"

"I hadn't thought about it."

"Then it's high time you did!" Her nose was very pointed. "Come on. Let's walk some more."

At noon the *Tai Ming* reached Samshui. Where the Three

Waters meet, she anchored. The Customs launch came out and took Peter and Primrose to the jetty.

"Wait here." He put her suitcase down beside her. "I'll run into the Customs House and see Ito. He's the Jap Commissioner. I knew him in Hankow. He'll give us tiffin and then I'll put you on your train."

Primrose sat on her suitcase and waited. Two indescribably dirty children in safety-first pants, came and squatted on the jetty. Their small unwashed behinds appeared, unhampered and unashamed. A ricksha coolie wandered along the roadway, leaning on his shafts.

Peter came back with Ito. Ito wore European clothes, but he had the national spectacles and bow legs.

"Miss-s Gartrell." He drew in his breath, hissing politely through his teeth. "Very pleased to meet." He bowed. "Mister Yule—very old friend. You come to tiffin—yes-s?"

"Thank you, Mr. Ito. I'd love to."

They walked through the village and along a dyke, built against summer flood water, to the wall round the Commissioner's compound. In the garden a tiny Japanese boy in a bright kimono came running to meet his father. His cheeks were red and his straight black hair was cut in a bang across his forehead. It made him look more like a Japanese doll than Primrose thought a child could look, and be alive. He saw strangers and hid behind his father's legs.

"*Oh—hio*—Good-morning." Peter smiled at him.

The small boy peeped out from behind the protecting trouser leg and giggled.

"*Sayanara*—Good-bye." He fled down the garden path, his geta smacking against his bare heels.

At tiffin Ito talked Service shop. Primrose was fascinated by the strange sea-food, served in fragile Japanese bowls; and by the scented Formosan tea. She only listened when Ito spoke of Peter's transfer to Wuchow.

"Very sorry to hear it. Very s-sorry indeed, Mister Yule. Nothing up the West River for a good preventive man." He helped himself to a wafer of green seaweed. "No smuggling. Very sorry for you."

Peter and Primrose exchanged glances.

At half past two, Ito excused himself. He was sorry—it was his favourite word—but, when the *Tai Ming* was in, he had work to do.

Peter and Primrose followed the dyke round the outskirts of the town to the railway station. The train was at the

platform. The carriages were wooden and unpainted. There never had been any doors. There was a brass plate on the engine stamped: 'Wolverhampton 1883.' They walked down the train till they came to an empty carriage.

"I don't have to change, or anything, do I, Peter?"

"No. You go through Fatshan to the Back Reach. I suppose the Consulate launch will be waiting there to take you to Shameen."

"Christopher promised to send it." She paused. "Peter, do you think Mr. Ito is right, when he says there's no smuggling on the West River?"

"No, I don't. Ito means he hopes there isn't. He's bone lazy and I expect his staff are no better." He stared at the dilapidated carriage. "I bet they never notice that those straw bags are not manifested."

"So you do think something is wrong?"

"Maybe."

"You'll write and tell me, if anything comes of it?"

"Of course. It was your idea in the first place, so if anything does come of it, you should get the credit." He smiled. "And don't forget your visit at *Ch'ing Ming*."

"Of course not. But that's two months away." It sounded like two years. And all that time Esther would have him to herself. Men get up to mischief in outports, even without Esther van Loons.

"How will you come?"

"Christopher often goes places in the *Snipe*. I could come in her."

"But women aren't allowed to travel in H.M. ships."

"They are—if they don't sleep on board."

"You'd have to. The *Snipe* would never do it in one day."

"I could come in her as far as Samshui, and catch the *Tai Ming* on from here."

"Yes, you could do that." He paused. "It's a pity you can't travel all the way in the *Snipe*—save your pennies."

"Yes, isn't it." She stared at his coat pocket. "It wouldn't matter if I could travel free in the *Tai Ming*, like some lucky people." She bit her tongue. The blood mounted to her face. She looked at the empty carriage and down at her suitcase. She glanced at Peter. His face was wooden.

Someone blew a whistle. Neither of them spoke. The whistle blew again, more shrilly.

"You better get in." He lifted her suitcase into the carriage. "They want to start."

She stepped onto the footboard as the train began to move.

"Good-bye, Peter."

"Good-bye." Then, because the corners of her mouth drooped. "It was nice of you to come all this way with me."

"I loved it, Peter." Why had he said nice. Nice was a horrid word. And even a brotherly kiss would have been better than no kiss at all. "Don't forget *Ch'ing Ming*." She waved unhappily.

"I won't." He waved back.

He recovered his temper walking along the dyke. It would be fun seeing Esther again. He wondered about the scandal that she travelled free on the *Tai Ming*. It was pretty generally believed. Of course, though she was only the wife of a missionary, she had been The Tribe's mistress for years; and The Tribe and T.L. Chuang were old friends.

Peter walked more slowly. Over the tiled roofs of the town he could see the ship anchored in the river. That was something he had overlooked. If there was organized smuggling on the *Tai Ming*, who was behind it? Peter dug his heel into the tramped earth of the path. Captain Browne? Charlie was too ineffectual, though he might know about it. Probably did. The pilot? Perhaps. But the compradore would be more likely. It would be risky without backing from higher up. But a fat rascal like that would run risks for money to buy rich food, opium and concubines. If it went higher than the compradore? Peter stared at the ship, motionless in the glassy river. If it went higher, then it might be awkward. He began to walk again.

Peter knew that T.L. Chuang was a Kwangsi man, and all Kwangsi men are rogues. But surely Chuang had enough irons in the fire, without risking his friendship with The Tribe by smuggling?

What Peter did not know, was that Chuang had begun his financial career importing fishery products, like birds' nests, sharks' fins and becho de mer, into Wuchow, before the heavy import duties of 1931 took the profit out of legitimate trading in such things.

Before Peter reached the jetty, he had decided that, if there was organized smuggling on the *Tai Ming*, the compradore was behind it. The other possibility he pushed aside. He had, as yet, no solution for the problem of conduct inherent in it.

Back on board, Peter watched the last of the cargo for Samshui unloaded. Later, strolling along the deck, he noticed the boat officer in charge of the Samshui search party, sitting in the saloon, drinking beer. It seemed unlikely that he intended to pay. It was still more unlikely that the compradore would supply beer without an adequate return.

After the *Tai Ming* sailed, Peter visited the hold, ostensibly to see Babetty eat her evening meal. This time he had a torch. The rubber shoes were still there, and the faint smell of fish. Otherwise the hold was empty except for the sacks of becho de mer, now plainly visible. Peter flashed his torch behind his trunks. The straw bags had not been moved. The Samshui search party must have overlooked them or—the torch went back and forth between the straw bags and his trunks—or, maybe, they had accepted them as part of his personal effects. Te's sleeping mat perhaps. Perhaps someone had meant them to make that mistake. The compradore had said himself that he had taken special care where he put things in the hold. Peter strolled over to the becho de mer, whistling gently.

His torch ran over one sack at a time. They were marked ~~was~~, as the manifest said. He found a hole at the bottom of one and his torch stopped. He stooped and, small boy-like, stuck a finger into it. Inside the becho de mer felt small and rough, very small and very rough. His finger enlarged the hole and a dried sea slug slipped to the floor. It must be very small to do that. He turned the light on it and sucked in his breath sharply through his teeth. This sea slug was coal black and spiny. He turned it over in his hand. No need to test it with a knife. This was the black spiked, the most highly prized and the most heavily taxed. The duty on this was something like 120 per cent. He cut holes half way up two other sacks. Both contained black spiked. A foot from the top of another he found third quality again.

He stood up and flashed his torch along the top of the sacks. Whoever the smuggler was, he had packed a layer of third quality a foot deep on the top, the rest was first quality. Peter shrugged his shoulders. Whoever he was, he must be mad. No examiner, unless he was drunk or bribed, took samples from the top of a sack, specially not from an open sack. No one took a sample that was handed to him on a platter. Even at China New Year such smuggling had no chance of success.

Peter clicked off his torch. On his way out, he stopped to pat Babetty.

"If anyone hopes to get away with this, bitchee, they must be damn'der fools on the West River than even I thought."

He went up on deck and leaned over the rail. The light faded and the hills came in close. The flat plain of the Delta had dropped behind. The *Tai Ming* stopped only once more before Wuchow, when she slowed down in midstream to drop passengers for Dohsing. Of course, someone might try something there. He glanced into the saloon. The tables were set. He would dine early and go to bed. At Dohsing he would get up.

The dinner was good. Once in bed the steady throb of the engines lulled him to sleep. He had been asleep for some hours when a burst of firecrackers wakened him. He tumbled out of bed, pulled on a dressing gown and grabbed his torch. From the sound of her engines, he knew the *Tai Ming* had slowed down. There was shouting and light shone through the slats of his cabin door. As he opened it, a dog barked. He crossed to the rail and looked over. There was a big cargo junk, manned by shouting coolies, alongside the *Tai Ming*, and from an open cargo port in the ship's side, Chinese passengers poured, carrying suitcases, cloth bundles, sleeping mats and birds in cages. A string of firecrackers, hanging from the junk's square stern, banged and spluttered, leaving a trail of sparks and blue smoke over the dark water. The shouting increased.

The coolies, fending off the junks from the side of the ship, shouted to encourage themselves and for the love of shouting. The passengers, tumbling into the bottom of the junk, shouted from mingled fear and excitement. The passengers left on the ship, stuck their heads over the rail and shouted *Kung hsi fa ts'ai*—in New Year greeting and farewell. Captain Browne, leaning out of the starboard window of his bridge, shouted to show he was awake and on the job. No one listened to him. The fat compradore stood in the open cargo port, scratching his belly. The stream of passengers dwindled to a trickle. The compradore deserted his belly, and with his hands deep in the wide sleeves of his jacket, began to scratch both elbows at once.

Peter thought suddenly of a conjuror who concentrates attention on himself, while his assistants stage the difficult part of the trick in the background. He left the rail and crossed quickly to the port side. It was very dark and, at first, all he could see were the Kwangsi hills, outlined against the night sky. As his eyes grew accustomed to the dark,

he saw a rope running out over the ship's stern. The rope grew taut and a sampan rode into view, water foaming under her upturned prow. There were three coolies in her, leaning on sweeps, and a dark heap amidships. Someone on the deck below let go the rope. It fell into the water and sank. The coolies bent to their sweeps and the sampan swung away in the current and dropped swiftly astern.

Peter turned and ran to the companionway leading to the lower deck. Of course, it had been Babetty's bark he had heard, ten minutes ago. Subconsciously he had known that, all the time. He hurried along the alleyway behind the open cargo port. As he stumbled down the steps into the hold, Babetty growled fiercely.

"Ssh bitchee!" He felt her hackles stiff along her back. "It's all right. It's me."

He flashed his torch round the hold. There was nothing now but Babetty and his trunks. The becho de mer, of course, had gone. That had been the dark heap in the sampan. This was the stupidest smuggling he had ever seen. When the Wuchow Customs asked that fat compradore to produce the twenty bags of third quality becho de mer shown on the manifest, what would he answer?

Babetty's eyes glinted green in the light from the torch, and her chain rattled. He walked over to quieten her. The beam of his torch shone into the space behind his trunks and lit up the compradore's answer—twenty bags of becho de mer, correctly marked. Peter felt through the straw of the nearest one. It contained third quality, as stated on the manifest. He smiled grimly to himself. The fat compradore would answer no questions. None would be asked.

Peter gave Babetty a pat and went up out of the hold. In his cabin he pulled off his dressing gown and went to bed. There was nothing else to do. For a long time he stared at the cabin ceiling.

The scheme was simple, and, provided it was not worked too often, there was nothing to arouse suspicion. If it was tried too often, a clever examiner in Wuchow might begin to wonder why someone in Hongkong made a practice of shipping becho de mer in numbers of small straw-bags of local manufacture, when a few large gunny-sacks—the customary packing from the Dutch East Indies—would be more convenient, cost less and hold the same amount. But like as not, even if he wondered out loud, his superiors would tell him not to be so sharp or he'd cut himself.

The throb of the engines came steadily up through the floor.

If it was simple and unlikely to arouse suspicion, luckily preventive measures were equally simple. A proper check by the Samshui search party, or, if necessary, a boat officer placed on board between Samshui and Wuchow, would stop it. If even after that, the smuggler, whoever he was, persisted in throwing cargo over the side, the ship could be held responsible and fined. Fined heavily, if necessary. T.L. Chuang might not like it, but The Tribe would be bound to approve, and the I.G. would certainly be pleased.

Peter rolled over onto his side.

If a smuggling ring, which used the ships of The Wuchow Steam Navigation Company, was discovered and broken up by a new-comer to the West River—and if the Preventive Deputy's job in Hongkong was still open, The Tribe could scarcely help giving him—whoever he was—the appointment. *Ch'ing Ming* was the next big festival. It was in April. That was a little late for the spring transfers. But not too late. His period of rustication might be cut to a few months. And a few months in Esther's company would pass pleasantly enough, particularly if it ended in a transfer back to Hongkong as Preventive Deputy.

He stretched and adjusted his pillow, and with his head full of visions, fell asleep. He was still asleep when the *Tai Ming* passed the Chicken Basket, a tiny islet a mile below Wuchow.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ESTHER spread her fingers under the green bath water. A jade crab, with flat oriental legs, hung from a gold chain round her wrist. The crab swayed gently to and fro.

"I can hardly see Sam in this water."

"Sam?" Peter wrinkled his forehead. "Sam who?"

"My jade crab."

"Oh!"

"And don't sound so uninterested. Sam's lucky and he's almost the same colour as the water." She sniffed. "It smells nice. What's in it?"

"Norwegian pine oil." He bubbled lazily, his chin under

water. His body was lean and brown. He was as unconscious of his nakedness as a Japanese.

"Pansy!" She watched the water drip from her finger tips. "Is it true, Peter, that the spring transfers are out?"

He nodded.

"Circular arrived yesterday morning."

"Nothing for you?"

He shook his head.

"No. But the Preventive Deputy's job in Hongkong isn't filled."

"So you're still hoping?"

"Yes I am." He reached for the soap. His hopes were based on his plans for the *Tai Ming* when she docked the following morning and on the fact that, if his plans were a success, he would be, despite The Tribe, the natural choice for Deputy.

Shortly after coming to Wuchow, Peter had spent sometime examining back manifests of the *Tai Ming*. It was clear to him that she had been, and still was being, used for smuggling fishery products into the West River. The smugglers confined their activities to periods immediately before a festival. Tomorrow was the *Tai Ming's* last trip before *Ch'ing Ming*, and Peter was convinced that she would be used again, as she had been used in February. This time he was determined that she should be caught. At his request, Paul Bartolini had telegraphed to Ito to put a boat officer on board at Samshui.

The smuggling ring did not appear to use the *Tai Ming's* sister ship, the *Tai Hing*. This might mean that it was the fat compradore who was responsible, but the extent of the smuggling suggested a bigger man. It did not take a magician to guess who, but Peter had lost interest in guesses. If someone big was mixed up in a smuggling ring, he could unmix himself. Nevertheless, this knowledge, and a natural reluctance to count his chickens before they were hatched, prevented him discussing it with Esther.

He washed vigorously.

"Really, Peter!" Esther stood up. "Must you splash like that?"

"You'll find a clean towel on the rack."

"Thanks." She strolled to the window, drying her fingers on the rough linen. She wore a close-fitting sweater and a tweed skirt. The thick silk of her stockings made her legs plumper than Primrose's; but they were shapely. She had no hat on her dark hair.

Peter glanced up.

"Better come away from the window. Te may see you."

"What of it?" She stood where she was looking out. "The way you and I have been behaving can't have left much to his imagination." She sat down, unembarrassed, on the only seat available. "How do you like Wuchow, Peter, now you've settled in?"

"I like it. I liked it from the first. Lots of golf, good food—and you."

"I'm flattered to be among the local amenities." Her eyes were as green as the water. "But I wasn't thinking of the flesh pots. What about your work?"

"The work's all right. Not much of it, of course."

"And Paul?"

"Paul Bartolini is a decent chap. And he's very anxious for me to rehabilitate myself. Of course, he began by ticking me off for getting myself sent here in the first place."

"Quite right too."

"But nobody could ask for a better Commissioner."

"And what about old Blount?"

"The Chief Tidesurveyor? He'll pass. He's a bully of course. But if you handle him firmly, he's harmless, and he is efficient. Also, his Cantonese is first class."

"So it ought to be, with that sleeping dictionary of his."

"Well, he married her, didn't he?" Peter grinned. "Poor creature! When anyone happens to call her Mrs. Blount, she nearly jumps out of her skin." Peter squeezed his sponge and stood up. "Hand me a towel, like a dear."

Esther gave him one.

"And I like living in this house." He stepped out of the bath. "It's big and cool, and the garden's grand with the river just outside the gate. Every morning I look across it at the pagodas on the hills opposite." He walked into his bedroom and sat down on the bed to dry his feet. He watched the swing of her skirt as she followed. "Somehow, Esther, you contrive to look bedworthy at any time of the day. If it wasn't that we're playing golf...."

She kissed the top of his head.

"Don't boast!" She avoided his hands. "Hurry up and dress. It would look queer if we kept the launch waiting."

"Nonsense! It's Sunday. You could say you found me in the middle of breakfast...."

"So I did. In bed."

"And interrupted me."

"Grumbling?"

"Oh no. No complaints."

"I am relieved." She strolled to his dressing-table. "You certainly didn't worry in case your Boy walked in."

"Te wouldn't dream of such a thing."

"No. Of course not. Too well trained."

"Look who's talking!" He flung his towel at her. "What about that chit coolie of yours?"

"Well, what about him?"

"He's well trained, if you like."

"Why not? You aren't the first lover to write chits to me."

"Nor the last." Peter moved to the chair where Te had put his clothes.

She sat down on the bed and dangled her legs.

"All the same, now we're on the subject, I do think you write too often."

"But I like writing to you."

"And I like reading them. But we ought to be more careful."

"How? Your coolie brings the chits direct to you, doesn't he?"

"Of course."

"And you destroy them, as soon as you've read them?"

"Yes. Yes, of course—when I've replied."

"You don't sound very sure."

"Well, anyway, I keep them in a safe place."

"I certainly hope so. They wouldn't exactly please Jo." Peter stood in front of the mirror brushing his hair vigorously.

"By-the-bye, who's golfing?"

"You and Paul—Blount and Andrew."

"Andrew?"

"Andrew Lloyd, the new A.P.C. chap." A.P.C. is China Coast abbreviation for Asiatic Petroleum Company.

"And Jo?"

"Oh dear!" Esther sat up. "Oh! Peter dear, I nearly forgot." Her green eyes caught his in the mirror.

"Forgot what?" He looked at her suspiciously.

"As I was leaving the house, Jo specially asked me to tell you . . ."

"Good God!" He stared at her reflection. "You didn't tell Jo you were coming here?"

"Of course. Why ever not?"

"And then you come to my house and skip into bed with me."

"I did not skip into bed with you. You pulled me in."

"Did I?" He finished brushing his hair. "How sensible of me." He grinned at her indignant face in the mirror. "And what did Jo ask you to tell me?"

"That he and Doc. Squarey can't get over till after tiffin. But that, just because he's coming with the old so-and-so, doesn't mean he has to play with him again."

"Again?"

"Jo played with him last Sunday."

"I see. You mean he wants me to play with Squarey."

She nodded.

"You know I don't want to."

"Who does? But Jo played with him last time. Besides, Jo has to watch him all week, padding round the hospital, looking for some helpless wretch to stick his knives into."

"My God, Esther!" Peter picked up his leather jacket. "I don't like the man, but you make him sound like a butcher—or worse."

"He is worse. Take this morning. Jo can't get away, simply because Squarey's operating and Jo doesn't trust him once he has a knife in his hand."

"Oh, come now, Esther!"

"It's true. Ask Jo yourself." She paused. "Every time Squarey looks at me, I know he's trying to see something in my insides, like a bad appendix, something he can use as an excuse to get at me with his knives. I'd rather he mentally undressed me."

"And be more used to it."

She stuck out her tongue.

"All right. Anyway he cheats at golf."

Peter burst out laughing.

"Life in an outpost! Everyone knows everything about everyone else, including the colour of their panties."

He strolled to the window. The West River was swollen with the spring rains. In another week it would be lapping at the granite steps outside the garden gate, and the golf course on the other side of the river would be under water. He glanced up the line of sampans, moored three deep along the foreshore, to the Customs *p'ai*.

"I see the launch is at the *p'ai* waiting for Blount. Let's go down and meet Paul and Angi at the jetty." He walked

to the door. "I mustn't forget I've something to talk to the boss about."

"And you won't forget you're playing with old Squarey after tiffin?"

"No, I won't forget."

"You've no idea how important it is. It's no rest for Jo to play with him. Poor Jo! If only I wasn't such a tart, Jo could"

Peter slipped an arm round her.

"If you weren't such a tart, Jo could?"

"Have Squarey flung out and a new surgeon appointed and run the hospital as he wants to, to heal the sick."

"Why doesn't he?"

"Because, if he started anything, Squarey would rake up some dirt about me and Jo would get kicked out himself." She looked at Peter. "You've no idea what a bunch of mishes will do, when sex rears its head."

"I can imagine! And the more its ugly head attracts them individually, the harder they have to hit it collectively, to convince themselves—and others—that they don't like the look of it at all." He gave her ribs a squeeze. "Sounds as if Jo would leap at a chance of divorcing you."

"Getting nervous?"

He shook his head.

"Not particularly."

"You needn't. Jo won't get rid of me till he feels it's time."

"And what about you?" At the door Peter stood aside.

"Me?" She hesitated. "If there was someone ready to marry me, Jo could divorce me tomorrow. Even a new lover a year, doesn't compensate for living with Holy Jo."

"Esther! That's not like you. Jo's a prince."

"Of course he is. I didn't mean to be horrid. But what does that make me? It makes me a stinker and you can't expect me to enjoy that."

"No, I suppose not." They went down the stairs and into the garden. "Come to think of it. I don't see why Jo married you in the first place."

"No?" She waited for him to follow her through the gate on to the river bank. "Most of Pekin wondered about that too."

"Oh! So it was like that?"

"Yes it was. If you're interested, why don't you ask Sir

Christopher when he's here for *Ch'ing Ming*. He knows all the Pekin dirt."

"I might do that."

As they strolled along the river bank towards the Commissioner's jetty, the Customs launch left the *p'ai* and came down river, with William Blount on deck, waving his stick.

"So Primrose is coming to Wuchow." Esther watched the launch approach. "That will be nice for you."

"It will be, so long as you two don't get in each other's hair."

"Really, Peter, what conceit! You needn't worry." She pulled her sweater over her hips and glanced down approvingly at the result. "I can amuse myself with the new A.P.C. chap."

"That wouldn't surprise me in the least." He looked towards the Commissioner's gate. "Come on. Let's hurry. There's Paul and Angi."

Paul Bartolini and his English wife, Angela, were coming through their garden gate. Paul was a dark man, with sensitive hands and a sallow skin. Scandal said his maternal grandmother had been a Korean beauty from Seoul. Charitable people said he was not too dark for a southern Italian; and did not believe it. Angela was pale and dark like him, and her eyes were big and brown. She was childless and tubercular. She needed a baby and a transfer to the cold, dry climate of North China. But Paul had crossed swords with The Tribe, and there was no hope of a transfer. Paul called her Angi and adored her. Her eyes followed him everywhere, hoping there would be a baby soon.

The two couples converged on the jetty, while the *C. L. Likin* came alongside, obedient to the loud orders of Mr. Blount.

Paul waved.

"Hullo, you two. I like to see such punctuality." It was typical of Paul to mention the punctuality and to ignore the direction of their coming. "But where's Jo, and...?"

Blount was about to reply, but Peter forestalled him.

"That's what Esther came to tell me, sir. Jo and Dr. Squarey can't get over till after tiffin."

"So we're not to wait." Blount waved a chit. He also was in the know.

"All right then. We'll go straight on to the A.P.C. for Lloyd."

The Chief Tidesurveyor handed the ladies on board. A growth on his left shoulder gave William Blount a stoop he

liked to exaggerate. He was never without an ash plant under his arm, and, except when he was in bed, he wore uniform. When he lost his temper—a pleasure he indulged in frequently—he waved his stick, shouted and foamed at the mouth. The noise was chiefly protective, but his fluent Chinese, learnt from his wife before he married her, made his sneering references to his victims too readily appreciated by victims and bystanders alike to be easily forgiven. He was no respecter of persons, and as more than one influential Chinese had been offended by his tongue, it was unlikely, despite his efficiency, that he would be transferred from Wuchow.

Esther and Angi settled themselves in rattan chairs to gossip. The *Likin* cast off and went downstream to the A.P.C. jetty where Andrew Lloyd came on board. He was a short, fair Englishman with a red face and the national weakness for pink gins and pretty ladies. He sat by Esther. Peter winked, but she pretended not to see. The *Likin* moved off again. A mile below the A.P.C., they passed the temple of the God of War, half-hidden in pine trees. Above the Chicken Basket, the *Likin* turned across the river.

The Chicken Basket marks the down-river limit of Wuchow harbour. The islet is named from the circular shrine on it. This shrine is supposed to resemble the wicker baskets in which Wuchow merchants ship live chickens to Hongkong. The Chicken Basket jogged Peter's memory. He joined the Commissioner and Blount by the saloon skylight.

"Ah, there you are, Peter." Paul made room for him. "Sit down. I have something for you."

Peter sat down.

"Something from Ito?"

Paul nodded.

"A telegram. It came last night. The *Tai Ming* left Samshui on time, and—as you said she would—with a deal of high duty-paying fishery products in her hold for Wuchow. Ito has put a boat officer on board as we asked—Boat Officer Mahon." He waited for comments.

Peter turned to Blount.

"Know anything about him, Mr. Blount?"

"Mahon!" Blount spat. "The drunken Irish sponge!"

"Sponge? Doesn't he pay for his drinks?"

"Not if he can get 'em free. If they're free—and there's enough of 'em—he gets drunk." Blount was an aggressive teetotaler and non-smoker.

Peter looked thoughtful. He turned to Paul.

"I rather fancy, sir, that I must have seen this Mr. Mahon on my way through Samshui in February. I can't say I was impressed."

"Even so, Peter, with Mr. Mahon on board they will not dare . . ."

"They did with me. And got away with it."

"But that was rather different. Mahon is on duty. He will be in uniform."

"What do you think?" Peter looked to Blount for support.

"If I was compradore of the *Tai Ming*, I'd fill Mahon to the bung with gin and put what I liked over the side."

The Commissioner shook his head.

"Even if you are right, Mr. Blount, on Mahon's evidence we could hold the vessel."

"Maybe, sir, maybe." Blount thumped the deck with his stick. "But, by God, sir, I'd rather have the stuff safe and sound in my seizure godown."

Paul looked from one to the other. Peter had turned to watch the Chicken Basket drop astern.

"What do you want me to do, Peter?"

"I want you to give Mr. Blount and me permission to take the *Likin* down to the Chicken Basket early tomorrow morning. We'll take the search party with us and lie in wait."

"What do you expect to catch?"

"Sampons, loaded with smuggled goods."

"What do you think, Mr. Blount?"

"The same as Mr. Yule, sir. By early morning Mahon will be in a drunken stupor. They'll unload the stuff into sampons below harbour limits." Blount pointed across the river to the path which leads through the pine trees past the temple. "What's to stop them taking it ashore by that path? With coolies there to walk it up into the town past your back gate?" Blount shook his stick in the air. "By God, sir, I can see them at it."

"All right." Paul stood up. "You have my permission." He went forward to join Angela.

Peter turned to Blount.

"We'd better rendezvous at the *p'ai* tomorrow morning, half an hour before dawn."

"I'll warn the search party." Blount slapped his stick under his arm. "A little action will do me good."

Peter did not enjoy his golf. He played with Blount before tiffin, but Blount's noise did not compensate for lack of action. There was no sign of Jo van Loon and

Dr. Squarey, so Blount and Peter played a four ball with Andrew Lloyd and Esther. It might have been amusing if Lloyd had kept his eye on the ball instead of on Esther's sweater.

Returning in the *Likin*, Peter sat on deck watching the light fade. There was a curl of smoke above the pine trees round the temple and, up river, the lights of Wuchow began to twinkle across the water. The Chicken Basket slipped past.

At the jetty, Peter left the launch with Paul and Angi. Blount waved his stick, but refrained from shouting anything about their plans for the morrow. Peter had an early dinner and went to bed. He slept fitfully.

It was still dark when he left his gate and made his way along the river bank. On the *p'ai*, he watched the dim shapes of the search party board the *Likin*. No one spoke. Five minutes passed and Blount's torch flashed to and fro along the foreshore. Peter heard his stick on the pontoon bridge, and as he came round the corner of the *p'ai*, the gold braid of his cap glowed faintly in the dark.

"Good-morning, Yule. You're early." Blount was never late.

"Good-morning, Mr. Blount." Peter moved towards the *Likin*. "I think we're all here now."

Blount pretended not to hear. He scrambled on board and ascertained in a hoarse whisper through the skylight that everyone was present.

The laodah cast off and the launch drifted downstream. Abreast the Commissioner's jetty, the engine was started. Sampans, moored along the foreshore, moved gently in the wake. After the launch had passed, they settled back as if, like their occupants, they were still asleep. By the time the *Likin* anchored above the Chicken Basket, the river had begun to gleam in the light before dawn. A breeze ruffled the surface. The air was cool.

They anchored close in and a boatman waded ashore. He climbed the path to the shrine. Peter and Blount sat on deck. Below, in the saloon where it was still dark, the search party whispered among themselves. The current murmured under the stern post. The world was hushed, waiting for the sun. A quarter of an hour passed and, across the river, a curl of wood smoke rose above the trees round the temple. It was light.

A stone rattled down the path from the shrine. The boatman followed. He waded out to the launch. Blount

leaned over and they spoke hurriedly in Cantonese. Peter joined them.

"What did he say about four sampans?"

"He says there are four on the other side of the island this minute, two men in each."

"I knew it. Come on. Let's look."

They went up the path after the boatman. Crouching behind the shrine they saw the sampans in the slack water below. Down river a steamer hooted and the *Tai Ming* came into view, her superstructure black against the eastern sky, smoke in a thick plume pouring from her funnel. She came on in mid-channel, a yellow bow wave spilling in front of her. The sampans slid into the current.

"The bastards!" Blount spat. "In broad daylight too!" He scrambled to his feet.

The sampans swept down on the *Tai Ming*. Ropes were thrown and, as they made fast, package after package poured out of an open cargo port in the ship's side. One heavily laden sampan had cast off and two others were more than half full, when Peter ran down the path after Blount. He pulled himself on board, as the *Likin's* engine sprang to life. She rounded the Chicken Basket, the Customs flag blowing from her stern.

There was a startled shout. One sampan turned and rowed frantically for the shore, the splash from its oars glittering in the morning sun. The other three were directly in the *Likin's* path. The coolies in them sat sullenly waiting while the *Likin* bore down on them.

Blount stood in the bows of the launch armed with a megaphone, his stick under his arm. As the launch came alongside each sampan in turn, a tidewaiter and two boatmen tumbled on board. As they drifted astern, Blount bawled.

"Make those bloody smugglers row you to the *p'ai*. Get going."

The *Likin* swept round in pursuit of the fourth sampan. It ran aground below the temple. The two coolies leapt ashore and bolted up the path.

"Black snakes for fathers, turtles for mothers!" Blount waved his stick, but, as they disappeared among the trees, he added. "Let 'em go. They took nothing." He turned to a tidewaiter standing near. "Mr. Ma!"

"Yes, sir."

"Get on board that sampan. Take two boatmen—two

that can row if that's not asking too much—and make your way to the *p'ai* after the others."

"Yes, sir." Mr. Ma sprang to obey.

The *Likin* backed away. She overhauled the *Tai Ming* between the Chicken Basket and the Customs *p'ai*.

"*Tai Ming* ahoy!" Blount's voice carried over the water. "Anchor off the Customs *p'ai*. I'm coming on board."

The *Tai Ming* made no sign, but Peter caught a glimpse of a white head and the upturned collar of a bathrobe. He was sorry for Charlie Browne. It had been so easy. There was no sign of Boat Officer Mahon.

The news of their exploit kept pace with them along the foreshore. Sampan people crept out from their bamboo awnings to look. Two of them, squatting on the prow of their bobbing craft, eating their morning rice, laughed immoderately and pointed their chopsticks at the fourth sampan, making its way upstream through the slack water inshore. To sampan people, the misfortunes of others are funny—often the only things that are.

As soon as the *Tai Ming* anchored, Blount scrambled on board through the cargo port. He was followed by the remainder of the search party, their appetites whetted by thoughts of seizure money. Two tidewaiters, dressed in boiler suits and carrying long screw-drivers, plunged down the hold. Blount bellowed his way along the alleyway to the compradore's office.

Peter climbed to the bridge. Captain Browne was there, his bathrobe bigger than ever.

"Good-morning, Captain Browne."

"Good-morning, Mr. Yule. This is most unfortunate...."

"That's all right, Captain Browne. I've only come to inform you that I am about to search your ship." It was plain, from the sounds below, that the phrase 'about to' was scarcely correct. "Four loaded sampans, which left the *Tai Ming* below harbour limits, have already been detained."

"So I have been informed." The rims of Captain Browne's eyes were black and wet. "I can only say how sorry I am. I shall see the compradore at once and report to my owners in Hongkong."

It would be owner, not owners, and sometime before Captain Browne saw Hongkong again. But nothing was to be gained by saying so.

"You're entitled to send an officer to accompany the search party, if you wish."

Captain Browne shook his head.

"No thank you, Mr. Yule. If my crew have been foolish, they must take the consequences. You go ahead and search. I had better dress myself."

Peter nodded and left the bridge. As he ran down the companion-way, he heard Blount on the deck below. In one of the cabins, he found him with Boat Officer Mahon, and a strong smell of gin.

Mahon lay on the bunk, an arm raised to shield his head from a hail of words, none of them nice, many of them Chinese and untranslatable. Blount's shoulder was hunched forward. His stick waved in the air. Froth collected at the corners of his mouth. To a man who neither smoked nor drank, Mahon was a wonderful opportunity. Blount was making the most of it.

Peter had no sympathy with Mahon, but Blount was wasting time.

"Mister Blount!"

Blount whirled, his mouth open, his stick in the air.

"Oh, it's you." He lowered his stick. "Yes, Mr. Yule?"

"Found anything more?"

"This!" The stick pointed downwards like a fiery sword.

"So I see." Peter smiled faintly.

Mahon struggled into a sitting position on the edge of the bunk. He sat there, his feet dangling, his head between his hands.

"I expect the Samshui Commissioner will deal with him. I meant, have you found any more smuggled cargo?"

"Some becho de mer in gunny sacks in the alleyway by the cargo port, and the tidewaiters found another lot in straw bags in the hold. Only one lot manifested."

"So they hadn't time to get everything over the side. Anything else?"

"The usual *lap sap* in the compradore's office; woollen piece-goods, sugar-candy, press studs, torchlight bulbs."

"Good. If that's all, the vessel can go alongside her own *p'ai*."

"I'll see to it at once."

"And meet me after breakfast to report to the Commissioner."

"I'll be there at nine."

Peter had edged Blount out of the cabin. He watched him hurry off towards the bridge. Captain Browne had gone to

dress. The pilot, if he could be found, would have the pleasure of listening to Mr. Blount.

Peter went back on board the *Likin*. As the launch moved away, a faint but unmistakable bellow came from the bridge. The pilot had been run to earth. The *Tai Ming* moved slowly up on her anchor chain.

At the Customs *p'ai*, Peter found an admiring crowd round the seized sampans. The unloading was worth watching. There were dried cuttlefish, red and tasty. Bags of black spiked becho de mer. Clarified sharks' fins, pale gold like a mermaid's hair. And, packed in boxes lined with cotton wool, something white and fragile Peter had never seen before—first quality birds' nests. The bystanders craned forward, jostling each other and talking amongst themselves.

Birds' nests are made by a species of sea swallow from a glandular secretion in the bird's neck, much as a spider weaves a web. The birds nest in Sarawak, in caves near the sea. The Chinese who harvest the nests, rent the caves from the White Raj. The nests are not unlike swallows' nests, one side of them flat where they have been stuck to the rock. The first quality are white and free from feathers or dung. They are the first the birds build, and, like the second and third quality, they are collected before they can be used. The second and third quality are clean too, but they are darker. The fourth quality, are nests in which the birds have laid eggs and been allowed to rear their young. They are dirty, but even they—and birds' nest refuse—fetch a high price on the Chinese market. The first quality nests are fabulously expensive, and rightly so. Birds' nest soup, served in a chafing dish with quail's eggs, ranks with green turtle, lobster, tuheorua, sharks' fin, bouillabaise and borsch. Moreover, it is an excellent, if expensive, prop for frail old men and tired young ones.

Peter went home to breakfast in high spirits. The seized cargo was valuable and the duty heavy. A fine of three times the duty would make anyone stop and think. Till it was paid, the *Tai Ming* could stay where she was. He ate a substantial meal. It was after nine when he left his garden gate for the *p'ai*. He found Blount strutting impatiently up and down the corridor outside the Commissioner's office, his stick under his arm. They went in together.

"Come in, Peter." Bartolini moved away from the window. "Good morning, Mr. Blount. My congratulations to you both."

"Thank you, sir." They spoke together.

Paul went behind his desk and rested his fingers lightly on it.

"It was your plan, Peter, and I'm giving you the credit." He turned to Blount. "But I shall recommend the Chief Tidesurveyor for early and deserved promotion."

"Thank you very much, sir." Blount stood as straight as his fondness for his hump would allow.

Paul picked up a sheet of foolscap.

"I have here a draft telegram to the I.G., reporting the seizure and telling him that I intend detaining the *Tai Ming* till the fine I impose is paid." He looked up.

Peter nodded emphatically.

"I have added that this seizure will break up a smuggling ring, which has operated for sometime undetected on the West River; that Mr. Assistant Yule is responsible for discovering this ring and for the plan which resulted in this seizure." He paused to smile at Peter. "And I am recommending that he be transferred to a more responsible position in a larger port, where he will have greater scope for his undoubted flair for preventive work."

"Thank you very much, sir." Peter reddened with pleasure. "I'm really very grateful."

"It is no more than you deserve." Paul replaced the draft on his desk. "Meanwhile, I suggest, Mr. Blount, that you go at once and inform Captain Browne that his ship will be detained till the fine imposed is paid."

"Yes, sir. At once sir." Blount wheeled and left the office. They heard his boots on the pontoon bridge outside. Charlie Browne would need all his phantasy to bolster his ego against the coming onslaught.

Paul walked to the window.

"Of course, Peter, you realize that this could not have come at a better time?"

"I realize that."

"If I was friendly with The Tribe—which, as you know, I am not—I should wire him personally. However, I can and will send him a copy of my wire to the I.G."

"Do you think he'll be impressed?" Peter could not help remembering who owned the *Tai Ming*.

"It will not matter greatly whether he is or not. The I.G. will be, and the I.G. will see that a copy of the telegram has gone to The Tribe. Naturally, he will expect comments on it. What can The Tribe do but suggest that you be given at least a trial as Preventive Deputy?"

"It's very good of you to fight my battles for me, sir."

"Nonsense!" Paul put his hand on Peter's shoulder. "You will see. We shall have you back in Hongkong as Deputy before the summer."

"I'm awfully grateful to you, sir."

"There is no need to be. I am glad to help you out of this place, even if I am not able to help myself or Angi." He looked down at the fast flowing river and thought of the coming damp heat. He shook his mind free of his own troubles. "Perhaps, Peter, when Sir Christopher and Primrose are here, we may have good reason for celebrating."

"I hope so, sir."

"However, we can talk about that later. You had better get on now with the seizure report."

Peter spent most of the morning on the report. The seized cargo was valued at more than \$9,000. The duty came to just over \$5,000. He fined the *Tai Ming* \$15,000 under Clause 21 Paragraph 2, of the Preventive Law—which calls for a fine of \$1,000, or an amount not exceeding three times the duty sought to be evaded, whichever be the greater. Then he sent the report to the Commissioner. The rest of the morning he spent on current work. At half past twelve he went along the corridor and knocked at the Commissioner's door.

"Come in. Oh, it is you, Peter."

"Yes, sir. Is the seizure report all right, sir?"

"Yes," The Commissioner hesitated. "The fine is legal, but it is heavy."

"Shall I reduce it?"

"Oh no. I have initialled it. Let it stand for the present. However, if we get \$10,000, I shall be satisfied."

"I understand. If there is nothing else I'll push off for tiffin."

"Of course, Peter. It has been a long morning for you." He smiled. "Your wire and the copy have gone."

Peter strolled home along the river bank. He served tiffin on the red-tiled verandah. From his chair Peter could see, above the roof of The Wuchow Steam Navigation Company *p'ai*, a black funnel with two Chinese characters down it. Already it seemed as much a part of the Wuchow scene as the two pagodas on the hill on the other side of the river. He felt he must talk to someone.

"Te!"

The Boy came on to the veranda from the sitting-room.

Peter looked at the high cheek bones and narrow intelligent face.

"Te, you like to go back to Hongkong?"

"*Lao Yeh*, what man would not? All men know Hongkong is better than Wuchow." No one in Wuchow had travelled, and the women were bucolic and slow.

"I think maybe, by and by, we go back."

Te let down the bamboo *lien tze* against the afternoon sun.

"Well, go on, Te, say something. What do you think of our chances?"

"Elder and Before Born." Te secured the blind at the correct height. "I think better not fine the *Tai Ming* too much."

"What thing!" Peter glared. "What thing! What do you know about fining the *Tai Ming*?"

"Master and Reverend Sir, every sampan child knows what happened this morning. Every child knows it will mean a fine. But little children do not know who owns the *Tai Ming*. Fine too big; trouble too much."

"*Ma ma hu hu ti hwa*—nonsense. We have the stuff. The ship will pay the fine. Or stay where she is, till she does."

"Without doubt, Master." Te bowed. He did not believe a word of it. Across the river on top of the hill were two pagodas, built, as is the custom, over a sleeping dragon, one at the head, one at the tail, to keep it down and keep it sleeping. Sleeping dragons were best left alone. That, at least, was not nonsense. Te began to clear away.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A WEEK later the long fingers of the morning sun crept across the veranda and prodded Peter awake. He grunted and rolled over, but the white, persistent fingers followed. He blinked and sat up. A glass of orange juice stood by his bedside and he drank greedily. Beyond the veranda, H.M.S. *Snipe* lay at anchor, her motor sampan nestling under her square stern. The sun shone on her white upperworks and glinted on the brass muzzle of her six-inch gun—protruding phallos-like under her forward canvas awning.

Down river beyond the Chicken Basket, a plume of smoke marked the approach of a steamer. Peter scratched his head idly while the *Tai Hing* steamed into sight. He stopped

scratching. The *Tai Hing* was not due till Monday. She must have left Hongkong a day early. Odd, when it meant arriving in Wuchow on a Sunday. He stretched lazily and left the veranda. The vagaries of the *Tai Hing* did not concern him.

Half an hour later he walked down the front steps into his garden. He glanced over the hibiscus hedge. At the Bartolinis' party the previous night Primrose had said she would be in the Commissioner's garden, before it was time to leave for the picnic up the Fu. The Fu is a tributary of the West River and flows into it at Wuchow.

The garden was empty. Peter strolled to his gate and looked up the river bank. Blount was coming along the foreshore in uniform. He saw Peter and waved his stick. Peter waved back and waited for him to come up.

"Good-morning, Mr. Blount? What's on your mind?"

"Nothing." Blount spat frothily. "The *Tai Hing's* in a day early."

"So I saw. Anything in the wind?"

"Not a thing." Blount whirled his stick. His cap was on the side of his head and his stoop was so pronounced that he looked like the Hunchback of Notre Dame. "I've seen her passenger list."

"Oh?" Peter's eyebrows rose. "Anyone of interest on board?"

"Nobody." Blount spat with even less justification.

"Nobody; except T.L. Chuang."

"T.L.!" Peter whistled. "Come to pay his fine, I suppose."

"That'll be it." Blount aimed a blow at an unoffending hibiscus. "Well, don't reduce it one dollar, Yule, no matter what the old *wang pa* says. He stinks of money."

"I expect he'll call at the office tomorrow morning."

"You bet your sweet life he will—first thing tomorrow morning." Blount slapped his ash plant under his arm. "Well, I must be getting along." He swung on his heel and set off in the direction of the Commissioner's gate.

Peter watched him go, wondering why he took such pains to hide his excitement.

Over the hibiscus hedge a gentle voice said:

"Good-morning, Peter dear. What are you staring at?"

"Primrose! I was looking for you."

"You weren't. You were looking at the river."

"I was watching old Blount." He came to the hedge.

Primrose wore a white silk shirt, blue shorts and sandals. She plucked a hibiscus flower and tucked it behind her ear.

"What had old Blount to say for himself?"

"He came to tell me that T.L. Chuang has arrived on the *Tai Hing*."

"Oh. What's he doing in Wuchow?"

"He's come about our seizure." He smiled. "I heard Paul telling you at dinner how clever you'd been."

"How clever you'd been, you mean."

"Nonsense! You put the idea into my head."

"Anyway, Paul gave you the credit in his telegram to the I. G."

"So that I could get back to Hongkong as Preventive Deputy."

"I hope you do, Peter." She paused. "And where does T.L. Chuang come in?"

"It's his ship, isn't it? He's come to pay the fine—I hope."

"Hope? Won't he have to?"

"He would in any normal country."

"What will he try to do instead?"

"Worm out of paying altogether. Failing that, he'll try to pay as little as possible."

"You think he ought to pay?"

"Of course. Smuggling on that scale would have been impossible without his knowledge and consent. If he was a small man, he'd have to pay. Just because he's a big noise, is no reason why he should get off. Old Blount heartily agrees."

"I see." Primrose would have felt happier if Blount had not agreed, but she did not say so.

Peter watched the *Snipe's* sampan move up to her accommodation ladder. Figures appeared under the canvas awning of her foredeck.

"Tok and his No. 1 are about to come ashore. They're having breakfast with me, before walking over the hills to the Fu." He glanced at her feet. "You don't mean to walk in sandals, do you, pet?"

"I meant to tell you, Peter." She plucked another hibiscus. "I thought I'd go in the launch with Esther. That is, if you don't mind. You three'd walk quicker without me."

"I don't mind—if you'd rather."

"I think I would. I like talking to Esther."

"I see." He watched the *Snipe's* sampan head for the jetty. "Here come Tok and Nickie."

"I'll run along. I haven't unpacked my bathing costume yet."

"All right." He paused. "Don't listen to everything Esther says."

"No, Peter—not everything."

He watched her down the garden path, past a clump of bamboo. She was graceful, like the bamboo, and she had the same gold look about her.

Lieutenant Commander Thomas Tallent Taylor, R.N., of H.M.S. *Snipe* and his No. 1, Nickie Langrishe, came up the foreshore. Except for his slim waist, Tok was thickset and powerful. His legs were hairy and, in his white shorts, his buttocks stuck so far out behind, that he could have balanced a bowl of goldfish on his backside and not have lost a fish. Langrishe was tall and dark. He wore a beard of which he was unexpectedly proud. Normally his eyes were blue, but this morning they had been stitched into his head with red wool.

"Hullo, Peter." Tok's voice varied from the roar of a lion, to the murmur of a sucking dove. "Here we are, bellowing for breakfast."

"Must you, skipper?" Nickie put a hand to his head. "Have you no respect for the Sabbath?"

"No. 1, you Godless wight!" Tok seized him by the arm. "The Sabbath means nout to you, and well you know it. What you need is breakfast. Porridge, fish, fried eggs, pork sausages, toast, marmalade. . ."

"Coffee!" Nickie stumbled through the gate. "Coffee, skipper. Just coffee. Black and strong!"

Tok and Peter ate large breakfasts, and for half an hour they sat on the veranda talking about Tok's ship.

"Why do the locals call her *Hsin Ip*, Peter?"

"No reason, Tok. It's phonetic, like my Chinese name, Yu Li. I don't even know what character '*Ip*' is. *Hsin* is the *hsin* for new."

"New!" Nickie laughed hollowly. "New!! Last time in dock in Hongkong the skipper wouldn't let me chip the paint off her bows."

"Of course not. Forrard she's held together by paint." Tok looked over the veranda at his ship. "But old and all as she is, she's Queen of the West River still. Go anywhere

on a heavy fall of dew." He stood up. "Well, Peter, how about getting along?" He prodded Nickie with a blunt forefinger. "On your way, No. 1. The mountains call: 'Excelsior'."

"Jesus, poetry!" Nickie staggered down the veranda steps.

Peter whistled to Babetty. They crossed the Customs compound to the back gate. The hills rose straight in front. The sun was hot and the path steep. Babetty ran ahead, her tail awave. At each bend she waited, till Nickie fell over her and cursed. Her tongue began to drool.

Half way up, Nickie's shorts were flapping damply against his thighs and his shirt stuck to his back. He pulled it off and the others followed suit. They reached the crest and sat down to rest. Babetty flopped at Peter's feet. Under his beard Nickie's face was scarlet, but his eyes were less muddy. There was a cool breeze. In the river below, the *Snipe* looked like a tooth-pick. Along the bank the port of Wuchow straggled to the mouth of the Fu. In midstream patches of current, edged with foam, turned and twisted and slid down river. On the far side, the golf course shimmered under a blanket of flood water.

"Well, chaps!" Tok put his hands on his knees. "Let us on. A swim will be just the stuff for master's body."

They crossed the ridge. In the wide valley below, dammed back by the sharp spring rise in the West River, the Fu wound green and sleepy. The path went down between scrub pines. A mile from the summit a stream joined it and ran beside it, bubbling cheerfully.

Nickie stopped short.

"Skipper! Water!"

"God, my No. 1 wants to drink water! He must be going to die."

"Can't I drink it?"

"Why not, Nickie?" Peter knelt by the stream. "Up here I'd chance it myself." They lent over the water and drank with pursed lips.

"Don't drink it all!" Tok crouched beside them and scooped up a mouthful in his palm. "Hmm! It tastes like water. Can't say I ever drank running water in China before."

"Neither have I." Peter sat back on his heels. "But as high as this, it should be all right." He glanced down into the valley. "Somewhere below there is The Pool of

the White Dragon. I've heard you can drink the water in it—if you can find it."

"I've heard that too." Tok stood up. "But isn't it the very devil to find."

Peter nodded.

"There's a local superstition that only lovers can find it."

Nickie dried his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Let's get the ladies and organize a search party on the way back."

"We can't, you bearded Lothario! Andrew Lloyd's coming on board this evening for a drink, so we'll have to cadge a lift back in the Commissioner's launch." Tok moved down the path. "Come on. If we're not careful, the others will get there first." He set off at a jog-trot.

At the foot of the hills they crossed paddy to a grassy bank shaded by a banyan. Beyond the bank a huge rock jutted out into the still green water of the Fu.

Tok looked about him.

"This, Peter, is just the stuff. All we need now is the launch."

As he spoke the launch came into sight. Behind her, her wake spread evenly, like wrinkles on heavy silk. They watched her come alongside the rock and Tok helped Angela ashore. Sir Christopher and Paul followed. The Commissioner's Boy and a boatman carried the tiffin baskets under the tree.

Two small boys in enormous hats, like gigantic toad stools, appeared out of the ground to stand and stare. An old man joined them, smoking a long pipe with a minute brass bowl. A young girl with a baby nearly as big as herself, slung on her back, came out from behind a bush. The baby's head lolled in sleep. A fly ran across its face and stopped at a sore.

Primrose and Esther had changed into bathing costumes. They lay on deck, sunning themselves, too lazy to move.

Peter scrambled on board, followed by Nickie and Tok.

"Come on, you two. Bathe before tiffin. Tok, you and Nickie change in the saloon."

Primrose rolled over on her stomach, shading her eyes from the sun. She looked up at Peter and smiled.

Esther lay on her back and stretched. Her skin was brown and soft. Her green costume was in two halves. It was designed to let the sun reach as much of her body as possible, without offending the proprieties. Esther did what she could for the sun, and let the proprieties take care of

themselves. Stretching did not help them. Peter could not help looking.

"Where's Jo?"

"Jo couldn't come." She sat up. "Squarey's operating again. It's his Sunday fun. Jo had to stay and protect the patient."

"You mean he's acting as anaesthetist?"

"He does that as well." Esther dangled her feet over the side of the launch.

Tok and Nickie came on deck. Tok went to the rail and dropped head first into the water. He re-appeared, gazed about him with water-filled eyes and sank quietly out of sight. The water rippled, smoothed over and was still.

Angela watched from the river bank, her big brown eyes staring at the unbroken surface. Time passed and she put her hand to her lips. Thirty yards out Tok's head appeared, a small fountain of water spurted slowly from his mouth. He turned and crawled in, the prominent curves of his backside, like the conning tower of a submarine.

Angela sighed with relief.

Paul heard her.

"What is it, Angi dear?"

"Nothing, Paul. I was. . . . I thought. . . . You see, last night Commander Taylor said. . . . I mean that he was afraid of water." She imitated his imitation of the lower deck's manner of speech. "I never go near water, m'am, on account of I can't swim."

"The monumental liar!" Sir Christopher's eyes opened with amusement. "He was Navy champion for years!"

The two men laughed and Paul patted her hand.

"My dear! You should know your own countrymen better than to believe anything they say when they belittle themselves. It is their way—quite a good way—of boasting."

Esther and Nickie swam round the launch. She rolled on her back and kicked. He caught one ankle. Peter and Primrose sat in the sun and watched.

"What shall I do after tiffin, Peter? Esther said I should walk back with you and Babetty."

"I'll have to walk back by myself if you don't. Tok and Nickie have Andrew Lloyd coming on board for a drink, so they'll have to go back in the *Likin*."

"Can I walk in sandals?"

"I don't see why not."

"Then I'll come."

They swam together. Later, he sat on the rock with her, while she dried her long legs.

"You know, Peter, I like Esther. I've never really met her before. She's always 'that missionary woman from Wuchow' to the old cats in Canton. Maybe she is a bit. . . ." Primrose watched Esther and Nickie in the water. "Nickie evidently hopes so! But she has so many other virtues the old Canton cats know nothing of—charity, humour and an understanding heart."

"Esther's a good girl."

Primrose's eyebrows arched slightly.

"Anyway, she's taking me shopping in the Native City tomorrow afternoon." She glanced down at him. "She's full of sensible ideas about you too."

Peter had nothing to say to this.

The Commissioner's Boy came over.

"Missy. Master. Tiffin ready."

After tiffin the picnic party lay about sleepily in the sun.

Paul was first to bestir himself. He wanted Angela home before the damp evening air rose from the river.

"I think, Christopher, if you don't mind. . ."

"Certainly, old chap." Sir Christopher sat up. "What about you, Primrose? Are you coming with us?"

"I'm walking back with Peter, Christopher."

"Well, run along and change."

When she had changed, she and Peter watched the others board the launch. As it moved away from the rock, Esther waved.

"On the way back make Peter show you The Pool of the White Dragon, Primrose, if you can find it between you."

Primrose stood on tiptoe.

"Why shouldn't we find it, Esther?" She cupped an ear in her hand.

"The Chinese say only lovers can."

"What did she say about the pool, Peter?"

"She said the locals have a superstition that only lovers can find it."

"Oh!" She looked at him out of her grey eyes. "Do you think we can?"

"I don't see why not. Anyway, we can try."

"Let's." She noticed her towel on the rock where she had dried herself. "Oh dear, my towel! I've forgotten to. . ."

"Never mind, I'll get it." He made a soft noise with his

lips. Babetty yawned prodigiously and stretched till her ribs touched the ground. As he fetched the towel, he glanced at the hills. "Best thing is to follow the stream. The pool must be somewhere along it."

They crossed the paddy, Babetty trotting at their heels. The stream led them into a narrow valley, its sides steep and pine-covered. It was full of sun and the silence of late afternoon. Primrose walked in front, Babetty beside her. By and by, they came to a fork where the main path climbed and a narrow one went down steeply through thick undergrowth towards the stream. Primrose stopped and lent against a tree.

"It is hot." She lifted her head and sniffed. "I love the smell of pine woods." From her pointed nose to her sandals, she might have stepped out of the tree she lent against.

Peter glanced down the path.

"The pool can't be far away. If we go higher, we'll leave the stream altogether."

"Do you still think we can find it?"

"Why not? It must be somewhere. Besides I'm hot. I'd like to swim."

"You've nothing to swim in."

"Neither have you."

"But I didn't say I was going to swim." She laughed. "Anyway I have a towel. Or you have mine."

From the other side of the valley the One More Bottle bird said:

"One More Bottle! One More Bottle!" The plaintive, repeated notes left the silence untouched. A breeze blew down the valley. Below, they heard the faint splash of falling water.

"Did you hear that?" Peter tilted his head to listen.

"Maybe it's it."

"Maybe it is. Let's go and look."

They followed the path down through the undergrowth till it faded by the bed of the stream. They looked up stream and down. Primrose shook her head.

"I can't hear it any more. Can you?"

"I think it's above us."

They turned up-stream. The bed of the river was strewn with granite boulders. They jumped from one to another till they came to a bend. Primrose scrambled to the top of a granite slab. She stopped abruptly.

Peter waited.

"Well, go on. . ."

"Oh Peter!" She stood stock still. "It's it."

"What's it?"

"The pool. We've found it."

"How do you know?" He scrambled up beside her.

"Look!"

Ringed with smooth slabs of granite, The Pool of the White Dragon lay waiting for them. A tiny waterfall splashed into it, sending down a stream of bubbles that turned and dwindled on the surface, leaving it clear and undisturbed. The sand on the bottom was white and the water like glass. A green and blue kingfisher flashed low over it. He lit on an overhanging branch that swayed under the tiny impact. His bead-bright eyes questioned the intruders.

"Peter, it's Heaven! It's so by-itself and still and clear and deep."

"Probably even deeper than it looks."

"What a divine place!" Her right foot pushed at the heel of her left sandal. Her eyes were bright like the kingfisher's. The sandal slipped off.

"Are you going to swim?"

"Are you?"

"You know damn well you are. One sandal's off already."

"Peter, nobody could not. It wants us to swim in it." She ran along the granite slab and put her sandals together on the rock. Her shirt and shorts followed. She stood poised on the pool's edge, her body slim and the colour of honey. No one naked could have looked less so. "Aren't you coming in?" She dived, a curved new moon, and came up hair streaming wet about her shoulders. "It's gorgeous!" She gasped. "But ooh! it's cold."

He slipped out of his clothes and dived. Under water he opened his mouth and drank. The water was cold in his throat. They swam together to the head of the pool and rested on a submerged rock. He looked at her.

"I didn't know you were so beautiful."

"No. And you didn't know I'd swim naked."

"No, I don't suppose I did." He put out his hand.

She slid off the rock.

"Swim back?"

He followed slowly, feeling the water slip over his body. When he reached the ledge of rock she was drying herself. She turned her body to the sun, drying herself and paying no attention to him. Her body was her own and beautiful.

"Can I have the towel after you?"

"Of course." She slipped on her shorts and sat, leaning on her hands, her face to the sun, letting it warm her.

The towel was damp and smelt of her. He dried himself and wrapped it round his middle. He wanted to kiss her. But she put her hand against his chest and pushed him gently back.

"Peter, you must be good." Her eyes were solemn. "Inside me, I'm not good at all."

He caught her hand and held it, while close by the One More Bottle bird called:

"One More Bottle! One More Bottle!"

She listened to the soft liquid notes.

"Peter, it's time to go. Put on your clothes."

He dressed and they followed the path to the fork. From there, they climbed to the ridge. Behind them the shadows grew long in the valley of The Pool of the White Dragon. Below them the sun filled the valley of the West River with reds and gold. The pagodas opposite stood up like spears into the sky. Evening crept down the hillside and into the streets of Wuchow. Smoke rose from the curved roof tops and all about them was the silence of high places. A cool breeze sprang up and blew her hair across his cheek.

"I'm bewitched." He stared at her. "I never saw you like that before."

"Don't sound so surprised, Peter." She smiled. "After all, you don't see all your lady friends naked—or do you?"

"You know I don't mean that."

"I know you don't."

"You didn't want to behave."

She did not reply.

"Why did you?"

"I liked it the way it was."

He sighed.

"Come on home."

They walked down the hill. Near the bottom where the path widened, they walked hand in hand. It was dusk by the time they reached the gate of the compound. He opened it.

"You know Gerard Manley Hopkins?"

"The 'wildness and wet' man?"

He nodded.

"You know his poem 'Pied Beauty'?"

"The one that begins 'Glory be to God for dappled things'?"

"I thought of that, when I saw you standing on the edge of the pool."

"Did you, Peter?" She turned to him. "I loved our swim and our pool. You must never tell anyone we found it."

"Never." He looked at her. "I thought specially of the last lines:

'With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
'He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise Him.

She listened to the cadence of the poem.

"Did you? Why?"

"Because to me you will stay beautiful always." He kissed her mouth. "I love you, Primrose."

"And I love you too."

They went into the compound. At Paul's gate he kissed her again.

"I meant it when I said I loved you."

"I know. I meant it too."

He held her in his arms.

"I didn't mean to fall in love with you."

She said nothing.

"Whatever happens now, I must make no mistake over this Chuang business. That's got to get me back to Hongkong, nearer you."

"You won't make any mistakes." In the dark she smiled. "Why should you?"

He kissed her again and walked back alone to his house in the gathering dusk.

CHAPTER NINE

GOING through the swing gate into the General Office the next morning, Peter saw a visitor in the chair beside his desk, a Chinese visitor, despite his European clothes and the fact that his back was turned. It was a broad back. The sort of back for which no tailor cuts a coat big enough. A felt hat usurped the 'in' basket. The visitor stared out of the door that opens onto the West River. At the sound of footsteps, he did not turn his head.

Peter had to cross in front of him to get to his desk. The visitor, his hands folded over the nob of a curiously carved stick, leaned forward till his large bottom lifted from the chair. The fingers round the nob fitted each to each and left no gaps for money to slip through. Buried in the flesh of one of them was a signet ring of soft Chinese gold, its jade seal carved to represent a crab with flat oriental legs. A gold chain looped heavily across the big stomach. The visitor's face was round and his mouth and nostrils wide. A grey stubble ran down his forehead into a widow's peak. His pedunculated eyes looked out placidly from behind rimless gold spectacles. He sighed gently, and as Peter sat down, he slumped back into his chair.

A visiting card lay on the blotter. As he picked it up, Peter recognized the Chinese characters, but he turned the card over and read on the reverse :

Mr. Chuang Tak Lum

General Manager : Wuchow Steam Navigation Company ;
Samshui Motor Bus Company ; Kowloon Wine and
Grocery Stores ; Kowloon Deep Well Boring and
Construction Company ; Wan Hsing, Jewellers ;
Dealer in Fishery Products, Customs Seizures ;
Etc.; Etc.; Etc.

Peter ran his nail down the card. It was not engraved. Chuang's fingers did not fit together for nothing. He looked round for his personal clerk.

"Mr. Ng." Half the Wuchow office staff were called Ng.
"The *Tai Ming* seizure report, please."

Mr. Ng. fetched the report and put it on the desk. Peter

noted with satisfaction the Commissioner's neat 'P.B.' in red ink beside his suggested fine of \$15,000.

"You have come to see me about the fine, Mr. Chuang?"

Chuang nodded. He did not speak English well, and in any language, he preferred others to do the talking. His hands wrapped themselves comfortably round the nob of his stick. It was a narwhal horn, valuable and rare, able to protect its owner against poison. He leaned forward, waiting.

"As soon as you can arrange to pay the fine plus, of course, the duty on the seized goods, they and your ship can be released."

Chuang nodded. He might have been listening to yesterday's weather report. The information had been interesting once. It was so, no longer. He looked out of the door at the West River. There was a pause.

Chuang drew breath.

"Fine very heavy. Wuchow restaurants no have got birds nest soup for *Ch'ing Ming*. Every man very trouble. You can arrange for me, Mister Yule?"

At his name Peter glanced up, but Chuang must have learnt it from one of the Mr. Ngs. Peter was not impressed.

"Easily, Mr. Chuang—easily, as soon as the fine is paid."

Chuang fumbled in his coat and drew out a pocket book, stuffed with letters and secured by a rubber band. He removed the rubber band, selected one of the letters and laid it on the blotter.

Peter recognized Customs semi-official notepaper. The letter was brief. Before he began to read it, he had seen the initials at the end.

"Dear T.L.,

Very sorry to hear the *Tai Ming* is in trouble. The

"fine, as you say, would appear unnecessarily heavy.

"The Commissioner in Wuchow is an Italian, Paul

"Bartolini. Remember me to him. If you see Esther

"van Loon, give her my chin chins and tell her I expect

"to see her in Hongkong shortly.

"Yours,

"A. Tribe.

"P.S. Before you see Bartolini make a point of calling

"on young Peter Yule. As Assistant in Charge of the

"General Office, he can and will help you.

"A.T."

Peter re-read the postscript.

"He can and will help you." The Tribe had meant him to re-read it—and act on it.

Chuang watched. There was another pause.

"You can arrange for me, Mister Yule." It was no longer a question.

T. L. Chuang was not ruthless. He did not believe in extremes. He would not break another man's rice bowl. Men whose rice bowls were broken starved, and starving men were dangerous. His credo was Chinese and simple. Compromise, share and share alike, so long as T. L.'s share was biggest. Live and let live, so long as T. L. lived best. No broken rice bowls, but the tit bits for T. L.

The sensible thing to do was compromise, but Chuang's assumption that The Tribe's postscript was all he needed to solve his difficulties, nettled Peter.

"I'm afraid, Mr. Chuang, Mr. Tribe is not familiar with this case. The attempt to smuggle was well planned and flagrant. We know it was by no means the first time for the *Tai Ming*." He stared hard at T. L., but the round face remained placid. There was nothing to show that Chuang was even listening. Peter opened the top drawer of his desk. "Besides, it is a breach of Clause 21 Paragraph 2 of the Preventive Law of China." He brought out the familiar yellow-backed copy of the law published by the Customs. Like most Customs publications it is bi-lingual. He opened it at Clause 21 and pointed to the Chinese version of Paragraph 2.

Chuang leaned forward on his stick. He adjusted his glasses, placed a large forefinger between the leaves and pressed the book flat. There was an aroma of expensive soap.

"You see." Peter followed the characters down with a pencil. "It states 'a fine of \$1,000, or a sum not exceeding three times the duty sought to be evaded, whichever be the greater'." He paused to let that sink in. "In your case, three times the duty is greater—very much greater."

The spatulate finger followed the pencil and T. L.'s lips moved, as he read for himself. He sighed and sat back.

"I pay \$1,000 and duty. Can do?"

"I am afraid not." Peter felt his patience ebb. "You read for yourself. In your case, three times the duty amounts to more, much more than \$1,000. In fact it amounts to more than the \$15,000 decided upon by the Commissioner."

Peter pointed to the figure on the seizure report with the neat red initials beside it.

T. L. Chuang did not look. He nursed the nob of his narwhal horn between his hands. He had no wish to push this young foreigner too hard. He sighed gently.

"Mister Tribe *lao peng yu*—velly ol' friend. Mister Tribe say you help me. I pay \$5,000 and duty. Take away birds nest for restaurants now."

"No. I'm sorry." Peter shook his head. "It is not enough—not nearly enough."

"I think more better you take." T.L.'s voice was soft.

"Still, no."

Chuang sighed and rose to his feet.

"Mister Yule, my way more better. Must have birds nest soup for *Ch'ing Ming*; must have." He stood waiting.

"I'm sorry." Peter wished he would sit down. "\$5,000 is not enough."

"Kwangsi men very bad men." Chuang spoke with knowledge. He was one himself. "No birds nest soup for *Ch'ing Ming*, plenty men very trouble. By n' by make trouble for Customs."

"Thank you, Mr. Chuang." Peter welcomed an excuse for righteous indignation. "I don't think we need go into that."

"Kwangsi men not like other Chinese." Chuang gazed out of the door at the West River, though he was not interested in scenery. "Every Kwangsi man knows plenty birds nest in Customs godown, plenty sharks fin, plenty bechodemer." He ran the three words together. "Maybe by 'n by plenty bobbery."

"I am afraid you will gain nothing by threats." If Paul were asked, he would reduce the fine; but for the moment Peter did not feel like asking. "Fortunately, the door of the seizure godown is padlocked and it is four-inch teak."

"No got godown door keeper." The seizure godown was behind The Wuchow Steam Navigation Company *p'ai*. T. L. rested one hand, palm down on the desk. "\$5,000 and duty, Mister Yule?"

"No! I've said no, already."

Chuang put his hat carefully on his big head and waddled across the office. He turned sideways through the swing gate, and as he waddled down the counter, he rested his hand on it at every other step. He was not helping himself. He was assuring himself that he was close to something solid. T.L. was an agoraphobe. He never walked across an open

space which he could skirt. He liked a wall at his back, or a flat stone he could slip under. At the main door he turned, raised his hat, bowed and vanished.

The Mr. Ngs watched. They knew who he was, and why he had come. They knew he was leaving empty handed. As the door shut, silence fell on the office. The silence lengthened till, under a shroff's busy fingers, an abacus clicked loudly from the Customs bank. The Mr. Ngs sighed and went regretfully back to work.

Peter stared at the seizure report and thought of the seizure godown. Should he ask Blount to put a boatman on guard? He half-rose from his chair. But, behind his loud noises, Blount was an old woman. As it was, he was excited about Chuang. It would be foolish to add to his panic,—and unnecessary. T.L. was bluffing. In the afternoon, he would come back.

Peter had another reason for doing nothing. If an unguarded godown was attacked, it would be only an unfortunate, but unforeseeable incident, not uncommon in outposts. There would be some damage to Customs property and, of course, if seized cargo was stolen, some loss of seizure rewards. But that would be all. No one would be injured and the incident would not be sufficiently serious to delay the transfer of the assistant in charge of the Wuchow General Office to Hongkong as Preventive Deputy Commissioner.

T. L. Chuang did not return.

Once or twice during the afternoon, Peter caught himself wondering if he should speak to Blount. Each time he buried himself in work till the thought slipped away. By half past four he was ready for tea, but he found something to keep him in the office a little longer. At five he put his papers away, locked his desk and left.

Walking along the foreshore he decided to call on the Commissioner for tea. He would mention T.L.'s visit, and after tea, if Primrose had nothing better to do, they could go for a walk down-river to the temple of the God of War. That was a good two miles from the Native City and the seizure godown.

Peter rang the bell.

"*Shui wu ssu ts'ai chia mo*—Commissioner at home?"

"*Ts'ai chia.*" Paul's No. 1 Boy smiled and stood aside.

Peter went through the sitting-room onto the wide veranda. Paul and Angela were resting in long chairs. Paul looked up.

"Come in, Peter. Come in and help yourself to tea."

"Thanks." He looked round. "Where's Sir Christopher and Primrose?"

"Sir Christopher will be down any minute, but Primrose has gone shopping with Esther in the Native City. I thought you knew."

"Of course! How silly of me." He poured himself a cup of tea. "I had forgotten all about that."

Sir Christopher did not come down for five minutes but Peter did not mention Chuang's visit. When Sir Christopher did come down, he and Paul talked Canton politics, while Angela drank tea and watched Paul. Peter ate scones and strawberry jam, looked at the river and fidgeted. The shops in the Native City were a mile beyond the seizure godown. He wished he had not forgotten this wretched shopping expedition.

After tea they strolled in the garden. Peter walked out of the gate and looked up-river. The evening noises from the Native City seemed louder than usual. Beyond the Customs *p'ai* there was an outburst of firecrackers. He glanced back at the others standing in a group under the big tree by the gate.

"Primrose should be back soon, shouldn't she? It's after six."

Sir Christopher smiled.

"My boy, women shop as they powder their noses—regardless of time." He turned to Angela. "I've often wondered what you people do when you powder your noses, especially when you're late already for the theatre." He shook his head. "It's a trade secret. I don't believe anyone knows. And when you do come back, there's no sign that you've done anything at all!"

Angela slipped her arm through Paul's. She wondered what sign Sir Christopher expected to see, beyond a faint look of relief.

There was another outburst of firecrackers. A small crowd appeared beyond the creek which separates the Customs compound from the first houses of the Native City. They milled round aimlessly and melted away. Someone shouted.

Sir Christopher looked at Paul.

"These Kwansi men make far more noise over *Ch'ing Ming* than we ever heard in the old days in Peking."

Paul nodded.

"They are a wild lot, I am afraid."

"I don't even remember hearing firecrackers at *Ch'ing Ming*." He paused. "The old chaps who sat outside the

Ha Ta Men, took their caged birds for a walk in the country to see the bright new green, but that's about all the celebrating they did." More firecrackers went off. They were loud and the noise carried oddly. Sir Christopher smiled, thinking of the old men and their perky loquacious minahs, but he looked toward the Native City and the smile had left his eyes. "It is uncommon noisy, Paul."

Something attracted Peter's attention to the *Snipe*. Lieutenant Commander Taylor was on her foredeck, legs wide apart, his eye glued to a telescope. He seemed to be scanning the line of *p'ais* in front of the Native City. By and by, he turned his glass on the group by the Commissioner's gate. Peter wanted to make a rude gesture with his fingers for Tok to see.

Lieutenant Commander Taylor shut his glass, went to the ship's side and looked astern. The *Snipe's* sampan moved up to the accommodation ladder. A few minutes later he landed at the Commissioner's jetty and walked up to the garden gate, his glass still under his arm.

"Good-evening, Madame Bartolini." He saluted. "Sir Christopher, could I have a word with you?"

"Of course, Tok. What is it?"

"I have come ashore to inform you—and the Commissioner, of course—that there is trouble in the Native City."

"Trouble, Commander Taylor? What sort of trouble?"

"I don't know, sir. There's a crowd of Chinese on one of the *p'ais* carrying banners, and the noise . . ." His voice was drowned by another burst.

Paul interrupted.

"I do not think it is anything, Tok. The crowd on the *p'ai* will be coolies unloading the *Tai Hing*. The rest is just *Ch'ing Ming*. There are perhaps more firecrackers. . ."

"Firecrackers?" Tok was startled. "Sir, those aren't firecrackers. Those are rifle shots."

"Rifle shots?" Paul was incredulous.

Peter knew at once that Tok was right. He had known all along. He had said firecrackers to himself, but he had not believed it, nor when others had said it. The sound had in it an added menace. It was rifle fire all right, though probably, China fashion, the shooting was into the air.

"Are you sure, Commander Taylor?" Sir Christopher spoke calmly.

"Certain, sir."

There was another burst, this time much closer. A twig,

high up in the big tree, above their heads, sprang into the air. It turned over and over and sailed down to their feet. Tok picked it up and held it out. The break was white and clean.

Paul looked at Sir Christopher anxiously.

"Christopher, you know Primrose is . . ."

"I know—and Mrs. van Loon. Commander Taylor, you are in uniform." This was the Consul-General speaking. "You must not be involved in an incident. You are to return to your ship at once."

Peter stepped clear of the group and whistled. He stared at his hibiscus hedge and whistled again. Babetty came over the hedge in one great leap, her belly brushing through its flowers. She raced along the foreshore.

"Good bitchee!" Peter stooped and pulled one pointed ear. He looked up at the group of people under the tree. "I'm going after them now."

Tok moved beside him.

"It's my daughter, Tok." Sir Christopher spoke quietly. "All the same, you must return to your ship."

Tok saluted.

"Requesting permission to move my ship up-stream level with the *p'ai*, sir."

"Yes. Yes, you may do that. But you must take no further action, you understand?"

"Yes, sir." Tok squeezed Peter's arm. "Good luck, old man." He turned and ran to his sampan.

"All right, Peter." Paul nodded. "Go quickly. See Babetty behaves herself, but do not come back without them."

"I won't." Peter glanced down at the bitch. "Babetty'll do as she's told."

Angela drew Paul to her.

"Peter better bring Esther here. It will be easier."

"Yes, Peter, do that. I shall telephone Jo."

Peter ran down the foreshore and jumped the creek, Babetty at his heels. Amongst the first houses, she smelt trouble and her ears went back. The few Chinese about, stepped hurriedly aside.

He ran down the main street in long easy strides. The big shops were past the post office, and, beyond it near the mouth of the Fu, were the big restaurants. He saw no one except fat frightened shopkeepers and their fokis putting up numbered wooden shutters. When there is civil disturbance in China, shopkeepers shut their shops and hope evil men will

think they have gone to the country. By the time he reached the centre of the town the main street was empty. Judging from the noise, the trouble was down by the river, not far from The Wuchow Steam Navigation Company *p'ai*, but he tried not to think about that.

He found Primrose and Esther chatting unconcernedly under the portico by the post office. Babetty ran behind Primrose and smelt her legs.

"Hullo, Babetty-bo. Hullo, Peter. Where are you off to?" Primrose smiled, but she had seen the trouble in his eyes.

"I've come to fetch you." He drew breath. "And you too, Esther."

"But, Peter, I told Angi we didn't mind missing tea. We have some more shops to visit, haven't we, Esther?" Primrose looked into the street. For the first time she noticed the ominous quiet.

"I know, pet, but there's a bit of trouble. It's by the river at the moment, but if the crowd gets to the main street before we get back . . ." There was a burst of firing. High up in a pawnbroker's opposite, a pane of glass shattered. In the silence the sharp tinkle of the falling glass was loud.

"Oh!" Primrose's fingers went to her lips. "Oh, Peter, the window!"

"I know, pet. Better come at once." He took her arm. "Cross to the other side, away from the river. Don't run; just walk quickly. Whatever happens, you're not to stop. I'll come behind with Babetty."

Fear drew them together. Once on the other side, they walked quickly, without speaking, their footsteps echoing in the empty street. As they reached the alley that leads to The Wuchow Steam Navigation Company *p'ai*, Peter heard someone running. His heart began to pound. A coolie fled out of the alley into the street and a lump of dry river mud sailed after him. It landed with a thud on the back of his neck. He staggered drunkenly. His knees bent and sagged and he slumped forward on to his hands. He shook his head once and rolled onto his side. His knees came up with a jerk under his chin.

"He's hurt." Primrose stopped. "The beasts . . ."

"Go on!" Peter's voice was harsh. "You mustn't stop. We can do nothing."

"Come on, dear." Esther caught her hand. "Peter's

right. We can't do anything, and Chinese crowds can be very nasty."

Suddenly the alley was full of shouting, gesticulating Chinese. Some of them carried white cloth banners between bamboo poles that swayed this way and that. The banners had slogans splashed across them in black uneven characters.

Peter recognized one of them.

"*Tui hui hai kuan*—take back control of the Customs."

The crowd pushed and shouted. More lumps of dried mud broke harmlessly in the middle of the street. The crowd poured out of the alley.

"Go on!" Peter stared at the slim back in front of him. "Whatever happens, keep walking." The hair on his scalp bristled. If the crowd turned on them now, he was helpless.

A small boy, his eyes hard with excitement, saw Peter and shouted:

"*Hai kuan jen*—Customs man."

But Peter scowled fiercely at him and the shout died in his throat.

The crowd paid no attention. It turned down the street towards the big restaurants and the small boy, determined to miss nothing, scampered after it. The shouting dwindled.

Without turning round, Primrose asked:

"Did they trample on that poor coolie?"

"I don't think so. He'd rolled to one side."

"Was he badly hurt?"

"Only stunned, I think."

They passed the last houses and crossed the creek. Peter drew level and slipped his hand into hers. She squeezed his fingers.

"Thanks for coming."

"Don't be silly, love. I had to come."

Babetty ran ahead, her ears two fat triangles again, the smell of fear no longer in the air. Peter noticed that Jo van Loon had joined the group at the Commissioner's gate. The *Smipe* had moved up-stream.

Primrose went to her father. He kissed her.

"No trouble, Primrose?"

"No trouble, Christopher. Only one poor coolie hurt. Babetty and Peter led us out."

"From behind—Duke of Plaza Toro fashion." Peter grinned sheepishly.

Sir Christopher put his arm round his daughter's waist.

"Thanks for going, Peter."

Jo van Loon ran lean fingers through a cockatoo of grey hair. Summer and winter he went bareheaded. His blue eyes twinkled.

"I'm certainly glad a posse of one man and his dog went to fetch the ladies. Every Chinese in his heart is scared to death of violence, so they can be crazier than loons in a crowd."

Jo's face was thin and deeply tanned. Despite his American accent, there was an elfin quality about him. He walked with an exaggerated spring, glad he was alive and glad he could be of service to the sick. The Navy called him The Wu of Wuchow because no one of them had ever beaten him over the local nine hole golf course, and Navy doctors liked to be invited to see his hospital.

"I'm certainly glad Peter came when he did." Esther powdered her nose. "If he'd come only a few minutes later, it would have been distinctly unpleasant."

"In what way, Mrs. van Loon?" Sir Christopher's arm tightened round his daughter.

"Yes, Esther, how come?" Jo looked round the group, his head cocked on one side. "We're all mighty interested, Esther, mighty interested." Jo was more interested than any of them. It was plain to him, whom Peter had gone to fetch.

"Go on, Esther." Primrose watched her remove the last trace of shine from her nose. "You tell them. Peter's really rather a hero."

Esther ignored Peter's embarrassed scowls.

"Well, the crowd poured out of an alley into the main street just as we passed it. If Peter'd been even a few seconds later . . ."

There was a brief silence.

"Good work, Peter." Paul spoke as his Commissioner.

"It wasn't anything. It wasn't anything at all." Peter looked unhappily at Primrose. "I had to go. There wasn't any danger." Whatever happened, no one must give him anything for this.

"Sure you had to go. All the same we're mighty glad you did go, and nobody gladder than me. Isn't that so, Miss Gartrell?" Jo smiled at Primrose as if they shared a secret.

"Of course it is, Mr. van Loon."

"Jo's the name."

"All right—Jo, but then you must call me Primrose."

"Sure I'll call you Primrose." His eyes twinkled.
"Primrose."

"Well, Angi dear." Paul looked at his wife. "It seems we have a hero in our midst. This calls for a drink. Champagne, if there is any on ice."

"Of course there's champagne on ice. There always is—in case you find some excuse for drinking it." She smiled at him. She knew he seized every opportunity for opening champagne, because it was good for her and she would not drink it alone.

Paul waited for the others to go through the gate. He walked up the path with Peter.

"While you were away, Peter, Mr. Blount came here in a great state of excitement. His coat was torn and he had lost his stick."

"What on earth . . . ?" Peter's palms grew moist.

"The seizure godown has been broken into and the *Tai Ming* seizures looted. Blount tried to interfere and was knocked down. Luckily for him, the crowd recognized one of the *Likin* boatmen out of uniform and chased him instead. Blount is positive that it was an anti-Customs riot." Paul paused. "He says that it was engineered."

Peter said nothing.

"He says you had a visit from T. L. Chuang this morning, and that T. L. went away dissatisfied."

"That's right. He offered \$5,000 plus the duty. I told him it was not enough."

Paul looked thoughtful.

"Did he seem upset?"

"He wasn't pleased." Peter paused. "Have all the *Tai Ming* seizures gone?"

"Blount did not know. He has gone to find out. He is sure of one thing. All the birds' nests have gone." Paul shrugged his shoulders. "Well, that is China. It cannot be helped. Of course, I shall have to wire the I.G...."

"The search party will lose seizure rewards."

"Unfortunately—but what can we do?"

"We could give them the maximum percentage allowed on the fine—when it's paid."

"Yes, we could do that. If Chuang staged the riot as Blount thinks, he will be so pleased to get his birds' nests back, he will pay \$10,000 willingly to recover his ship." Paul shooed his guests up the front steps. "You did not mention Chuang's visit to me, did you, Peter?"

"No sir. I meant to tell you at tea, and then Sir Christopher came in and I forgot."

"I see."

Sir Christopher was waiting for them in the hall.

"Paul, I heard you say you'd have to wire Old Andy about the riot and the attack on your godown."

"So I shall—as soon as Blount can let me have particulars."

"I see." Sir Christopher put his hand on Peter's shoulder.

"As soon as the official wire has gone, would it be in order for me to send off one of my own, telling Sir Andrew how extremely grateful I am to this chap here?"

"Sir, please!" Shame made Peter's eyes smart. "Sir, really I'd rather you didn't. I did nothing at all. Tok wanted to go. I enjoyed the run. So did Babetty. There was nothing for us to do when we got there. Please, I'd really rather . . ."

"Nonsense, Peter!" Paul took his arm. "If Sir Christopher wants to wire the I.G. it might easily be the very thing you need."

"How's that, Paul, is there something in the wind?"

"It is Service shop, Christopher, and would not interest you. But you can take it from me, a wire from you at this juncture might do Peter's career a great deal of good."

Peter followed them into the sitting-room. Through an open window came the sound of a lone shot fired from somewhere near the mouth of the Fu—one of Chuang's men announcing the safe arrival of the last of the birds' nests. Peter stared at the river, wondering if Chuang did not stop at rioting and violence, just where he would stop. He was a Kwangsi man. He had said himself that Kwangsi men were very bad men. Peter agreed with him.

CHAPTER TEN

WALKING into the General office on Tuesday morning, Peter knew that events were about to repeat themselves. The same usurping hat lay across the 'in' basket, the same large body overflowed the chair. He glanced at the blotter. There was no visiting card this time but a narrow rectangle of yellow paper lay in its place, a few lines of Chinese characters down it, a red seal stamped diagonally across the last two lines.

Peter read, resting his hands on either side of the blot-

ting pad. The characters of the last two lines were numerals, not the ordinary numerals, but the big important characters used on cheques. The slip of paper was a native banking order for \$10,000, payable to the Commissioner of Customs, Wuchow.

T. L. Chuang sat clasping and unclasping the nob of his stick. He did not speak. The native order did that for him.

"And what, Mr. Chuang, is this?" Peter waved the slip of yellow paper in the air. The question was a tactical blunder. Peter knew what it was and Chuang knew that he knew.

"*Tai Ming* fine, Mister Yule."

"Who says so?"

"Mister Yule, yesterday you say \$5,000 and duty not enough, so today I pay \$10,000 for fine only." Chuang ran one hand over his face from widow's peak to chin. "\$10,000 can do now." Now, was the word that mattered.

Peter sat down. He knew, and he knew Chuang knew, that \$10,000 was less than the \$5,000 plus duty Chuang had offered the day before, but nothing was to be gained by saying so. Useless to mention the looted seizures. Chuang would only shake his head over the rogueries of the men of Kwangsi. Useless to ask Chuang how he knew \$10,000 would be accepted. It would be. That was enough.

Peter glanced at a nearby desk.

"Mr. Ng, let me have the *Tai Ming* seizure report, please."

Peter altered the fine, clipped the native banking order to the report and handed the papers back to Mr. Ng.

"For the Commissioner, Mr. Ng. Please take them to him yourself."

Two applicants for cargo leant over the public counter and gazed at their applications under Chuang's hat. The sight did not trouble them. They were Customs runners and paid to wait. Tomorrow was another day. Peter played with a pencil while the river sucked and bubbled round the chain moorings of the *p'ai*.

"Mister Yule, everyone very sorry for trouble yesterday." Chuang wagged his head. "You savvy, I talkee you, Kwangsi men belong very bad. No can trust." Chuang denounced the men of his own province with commendable freedom from personal bias.

"No? Mr. Chuang, you surprise me."

"All the same, Mister Yule, everything all right."

"Oh—how do you make that out?"

"No door keeper at godown, so no Customs man hurt. This very lucky—very lucky indeed."

Peter said nothing. If Chuang ascribed the absence of a guard to luck, he had nothing to say.

Mr. Ng returned with the seizure report, countersigned by the Commissioner and the receipt for the fine.

"Here's your receipt, Mr. Chuang. The *Tai Ming* is free to clear any time."

Chuang put the receipt away in his pocket book.

"Next Saturday. Next Saturday five o'clock can do."

"That means you'll be here for the rest of the week?"

Peter liked Wuchow better without T.L.

"No, no." Chuang shook his head. "I go *Tai Hing* tomorrow."

Peter breathed more easily.

"I hope, before you go, you'll have a word with Captain Browne. We don't want any more smuggling on the *Tai Ming*."

"No, no; no more smuggling on Wuchow Steam Navigation company steamers. Too much trouble. Just now plenty other business in Hongkong."

Peter wondered what rogueries were covered by plenty other business.

"Mister Yule." Chuang leaned forward clasping his narwhal horn. "Everything fixed. You fix for me like Mr. Tribe say. Everything fine . . ."

"I'm glad . . ."

Chuang ignored the interruption.

"In Hongkong I tell Mr. Tribe. By and by, maybe you get transfer. Maybe you come . . ."

"I have only recently been transferred here. There is no likelihood of another move for me for sometime."

"Mister Yule, Mr. Tribe my very ol' friend. Just now in Hongkong very good Customs job. Maybe you . . ."

"If Mr. Tribe needs my help, Mr. Chuang, no doubt he'll ask for it."

"Mister Yule—" Chuang regarded Peter from behind his thick glasses. "Mister Yule, Mrs. van Loon go Hongkong, maybe one two weeks time, for shopping in Hongkong fantan in Macao with Mr. Tribe. You want, I fix you travel in *Tai Ming* with Mrs. van Loon."

Peter's face grew red.

"Really, Mr. Chuang, I'm glad you're satisfied with what little I could do for you, but nothing is to be gained by

exaggerating it. And, if I were you, I don't think I should interfere with purely service matters."

Chuang heaved himself upright.

"Mister Yule, you wancha help Mr. Tribe?" He held out a hand like a flipper which wrapped itself, soft and clinging, round Peter's reluctant fingers. "You wancha help me?" He did not shake Peter's hand but he pressed it to show he had not forgotten it. "You wancha help me all same as in Wuchow only more . . ."

"My dear Mr. Chuang! I'm glad you're satisfied, but I did very little, very little indeed." Peter recovered his hand and spread his fingers behind his back to let the air get at them. "I hope you have a pleasant journey in the *Tai Hing* tomorrow." He moved towards the counter. "That, I think, is everything." He held the swing gate open.

Hat in hand Chuang sidled through. He worked his way methodically down the counter. In Macao Mrs. van Loon and Mr. Tribe would patronize one of his two gambling shops, good financial ventures both; though neither of them paid as well as the brothel he ran between them, to accommodate patrons who wished to celebrate their winnings, or forget their losses, to his further financial benefit. Mr. Tribe was a good gambler. He played for high stakes. Generally he won, but when he lost, he wasted no time in vain regrets. There would be no regrets for either of them, if this young man could be persuaded to come to Hongkong and help. No doubt he would come, if he was offered sufficient inducement.

At the door Chuang turned, his hat still in his hand.

"*Ts'ai chien, Yu hsien sheng*—See you again soon, Mr. Yule, sir."

"Goodbye, Mr. Chuang."

"*Ts'ai chien*." Chuang put his hat on his head and pushed the door open. "*Ts'ai chien hsiang chiang fu shui wu ssu*—au revoir, Mr. Hongkong Deputy Commissioner." The door swung to, behind him.

Peter strode back scowling to his desk. He seized the applications in his basket, scrawled his initials across them and threw them on to the *t'ingch'ai's* desk. He went through the door on to the landing stage and stared at the river. From the corner of the *p'ai* he could see into the Commissioner's garden. Someone in white was moving about on the other side of the hedge. The sun that glinted on the river shone on something more golden than the bamboo. Peter only

stopped in the office long enough to tell Mr. Ng he would not be back till after tiffin. He left the *p'ai* and ran up the foreshore to the hedge.

"Primrose?"

"Peter—what are you doing out of the office?"

"Taking the rest of the morning off. Come for a walk to the temple."

"I'm supposed to be cutting flowers for Angi."

"The *hwa'rh chang* can do that. I want to talk to you."

She hesitated.

"All right, but you must wait till I tell Angi." She rejoined him in a few minutes.

They went by the foreshore. Passing his house, Peter whistled for Babetty. Beyond the A.P.C. the path climbed above the river. Pine trees grew about it and the path was brown with their fallen needles. A black-eared kite sailed above the river, his scimitar wings outstretched, his forked tail twisting this way and that in obedience to the upthrust of invisible air currents. Only his head, turning to left and right, as first one eye and then the other searched the surface of the water a hundred feet below, ignored the medium of his flight.

"What is it you want to talk to me about, Peter?"

"I'll tell you in a minute. I want to show you something first." He watched the soaring bird. "By the way, when are you leaving?"

"Christopher has to go back tomorrow in the *Snipe*. I suppose I might as well go in the *Tai Hing* tomorrow, too."

"Why not go in the *Tai Ming* with old Charlie Browne next Saturday?"

"Oh, so she's released at last." She hesitated. "I might do that. I'd have to ask Angi."

"Angi'll love having you. So shall I."

Their feet made no sound on the carpet of pine needles.

"Anyway, whether I go back tomorrow or Saturday, I'm going to Hongkong first."

"Oh! What for?"

"To see my dressmaker about a frock for the Governor's ball on the 4th of June. Esther's getting a new frock too."

"I see." Peter did not want to talk about Esther, or her frock.

The path turned steeply up to the temple. It grew rough, the earth washed away by rain. Pine needles lay stranded here and there between the stones. The open space

before the temple was deserted. A bronze urn, half filled with sand, stood in the courtyard. Sticks of incense smouldered in the sand, their thin columns of smoke bent this way and that by the eddying wind, and in the urn grey ash rolled aimlessly over miniature sand dunes. The odour of incense mingled with the fresh smell of pines. Rank grass grew between the uneven flags, but, despite its deserted appearance, the temple had about it an air of peace.

Beyond the threshold a many-armed idol, gaudy with reds and gold, faced them. A coolie sweeping before it looked up, stared and went on with his sweeping. There was no sign of an attendant bonze.

"Not very beautiful is he?" Peter glanced at the idol. "Still, he's the God of War, so what can you expect." He took her arm. "What I really want to show you is over here." He walked her to one side and stopped before a small shrine.

Inside an idol sat crosslegged, palms together, fingers pointing upwards. Above the shrine there was a wooden scroll with Chinese characters in gold. Peter read aloud, enjoying the beauty and monosyllabic economy of written Chinese.

'Better do right at home than walk a thousand li to burn incense.' He nodded. "It's a good motto for him."

"Who is he?"

"A Chinese assistant called Ng. He spent his whole Service career in Wuchow, and, in the end, he died here of a paralytic stroke."

"However did he become a God?"

"The Camphorwood Co-operative Society of Kwangsi deified him in recognition of his services to them and to their trade."

"What a queer end for a civil servant."

"Isn't it?" He stared at the figure. "As we came along the path, I was wondering if I would have joined the Customs on the off chance of being deified after thirty years' service."

She turned to look at him.

"Peter—what are you getting at?"

"T. L. Chuang came to see me this morning."

"Well . . . ?"

He shifted uneasily on his feet.

"What did he want, Peter?"

"Primrose, I'm in a mess." He glanced at her. "Not a bad mess—yet. But, if I ignore it, it'll get worse."

"Tell me."

"I'm responsible for that riot." He saw she was about to speak. "Oh, yes I am or at any rate, I'm responsible for not taking adequate precautions to meet it. Responsible, in fact, for playing Chuang's game. Now he hopes I'll go on playing it."

"Hopes you'll go on playing it!" There was consternation in her voice. "Peter, you wouldn't. . . ?"

"No, I wouldn't. But, as he left the office, he as good as promised me the Hongkong Deputy's job if I did."

"Could he do that?"

"He's pretty powerful and he's a great friend of The Tribe's and . . ." He paused. "Anyway, you can take it from me, T. L. won't help me just for my bright eyes."

"But, Peter, you wouldn't accept his help."

"No—much as I want the job—I don't want any of his damned help, or any more of his damned interference."

"What did you say?"

"He didn't give me a chance to say anything."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to see Mister T. L. Chuang before he leaves tomorrow, and tell him what he can do with his help and with the job. And, if I get any more of his damned impertinence, I'll poke the old so-and-so on his flat nose."

"And that will mean?"

He stared at Mr. Ng sitting comfortably in his niche.

"Thirty years' service in Wuchow—or places like it—and maybe at the end a small niche. . . ."

"So you got me to come here to show me Mr. Ng and ask me what I thought of that as an idea?"

"That's about it." He smiled faintly. "You don't sound as if . . ."

"I don't think much of running away, if that's what you mean."

"Running away? I don't see . . .?"

"Don't you? Or is it you don't want to?" She faced him. "Of course it's running away."

"Primrose, really, I don't see . . ."

"Peter, will you listen! You were sent to Wuchow because you did your job as you thought it ought to be done, and not as some people wanted you to do it. Weren't you, Peter?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"So now, just because Chuang has jockeyed you into a false

position, you want to rush off and tell him you still mean to do your job in your own way. Though you know quite well if you do tell him, that you'll stay here for the rest of your life—like Mr. Blount and poor Paul."

"Well, Wuchow isn't such a bad place."

"Oh Peter!" There were tears of temper in her eyes. "How can you say that? Wuchow is a small place for small people. China's a big country. If you're going to help China, you've got to be a big person."

The intensity in her voice startled him.

"So you think I can help?"

"You can try."

"Yes, I can try." Outside he heard the whisper of the wind in the pines. It brought with it a whiff of incense.

"Well—how do I begin?"

She wrinkled her forehead.

"I'm a bit taken aback, Peter. I thought you had a good chance of the Deputy's job without. . . ."

"So I have. I'm pretty certain the I.G. meant me to have it this spring, and, since then, Paul's done what he could and your Dad promised. . . ."

"Then I don't see . . .? Peter, you haven't promised anything?"

"Primrose! For God's sake! I told you he didn't give me a chance to speak."

"All right. No need to get cross. Then what's the difficulty? Suppose the I. G. makes you Deputy? Once you're back in Hongkong, can't you thumb your nose at Chuang?"

"Ye-es." He hesitated. "Yes, I suppose I could, but I'd rather he knew from the start that I'm having nothing more to do with him, or his schemes, whatever they are."

"But, Peter, that's silly. There's no need to do anything now. Wait till you get the Deputy's job. Then, when Chuang makes the first move, as he's bound to do, you put him firmly in his place." She paused. "And I'd be as subtle as he is when you do it, so no one but Chuang knows he's been sat on."

"As subtle as T.L. ! That would take some doing."

"You can do it—if you try." She took his hand. "And I'll help."

"You're a trump." He squeezed her fingers. "The old rogue thinks he can get round anyone with his offers." He paused. "That's one reason I wanted you to wait till the

Tai Ming. If you went tomorrow on the *Tai Hing* he'd be on board, and, before you got as far as the Chicken Basket, he'd be offering you free trips on his wretched ships and God knows what else besides."

"I can look after myself." Her nose was very pointed. "All the same, I'll stay till Saturday to please you." She kissed his cheek. "And you leave Chuang alone to please me. I want you to serve China, Peter—not some local co-operative society in an outport like Wuchow. And, to do that, you've got to get out of Wuchow."

"Yes, I suppose you're right." He looked at her steady grey eyes. "I didn't know, Primrose. . . ."

"That I had that much sense. Why not? I'm Christopher Gartrell's daughter."

"And proud of it."

"Yes, Peter. And some day, if you're sensible, I'll be proud of you too."

They walked back from the temple hand in hand.

The next morning Sir Christopher left in the *Snipe*. In the afternoon Peter watched the *Tai Hing* pass the Customs *p'ai*. Wuchow was a pleasanter place without T.L.

Shortly after tiffin on Friday the Commissioner's *t'ingch'ai* hurried across the General office.

"Sir, Commissioner wants you topside, chop chop."

Peter followed, wondering what all the excitement was about.

Paul was at the window looking over the river. He pointed to his desk. There was a telegram on the blotter.

"A surprise for you, Peter—a pleasant one."

Peter picked it up. The decoded message was in Paul's neat hand.

"Yule to Kowloon, Act. Prev. D/C., (temp.): to proceed immediately."

"Good God!" Peter stared, looked at Paul and swallowed.

"It's everything I hoped for."

"It is only temporary, mind."

"I don't care. It's a chance. All I want is a chance."

"I know how you feel." Paul came away from the window.

"Only, Peter, go carefully. Remember, if you make a mistake in your first months as Deputy, it will stick out, as Jo would say, like a sore thumb."

"It says immediately, sir. Does that mean I needn't wait for a successor?"

"If you were packed, you could go tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? In the *Tai Ming* with Primrose? I'd like that."

"But you could not be ready in time."

"I could be, if I went home now and started packing."

Paul hesitated, but not for long. He was not one to say no, because he liked the sound of the word. Besides, Primrose was old enough to say no for herself.

"All right, Peter, if you can manage it."

"Thank you, sir." Peter left the office and ran along the foreshore, the telegram still in his hand.

Primrose was in the garden.

"Hullo, Peter . . ."

"Primrose . . . Primrose . . . where are you?" He looked along the hedge. "I have something to show you."

"Here I am." She leaned over the hedge. "What is it, Peter?"

"This!" He waved the telegram. "Just look at this."

"Here!" She caught his wrist. "Hold still. I can't see, if you flap it about." Her fingers were cool and affectionate. "Peter, this is grand." She read it again.

"What does 'temp.' in brackets mean?"

"It means I'm on trial."

"Oh!" Her eyes were serious. "You'll have to do well."

"Of course, darling." He smiled at her over the hedge.

"But now I must rush."

"Why?"

"Because, if I can get packed in time, Paul says I can go in the *Tai Ming*."

"In the *Tai Ming* with me?"

"Yes—with you. Why not?"

"No reason. Only . . ."

"Only what, Primrose?"

"Only nothing, Peter." Her eyes began to dance.

"Peter, I am glad. Glad you got the job and glad you're coming with me. Now hurry, hurry and pack." She leaned over the hedge.

He kissed her and ran on.

On Saturday afternoon the *Likin* went upstream leaving behind a flutter of handkerchiefs and a lifting of hats. As the launch passed the Customs *p'ai*, the office staff crowded onto the landing stage till it settled and water seeped between the planks. The clerks picked up their long gowns and stepped back off the stage, shaking the water from their cloth slippers. From the office doors they continued to wave.

Primrose waved back.

"This is a better send-off than you had in Hongkong."

"Yes it is," Peter smiled. "It's also better weather." He waved his hat. "Still, I've been happy in Wuchow. My Mr. Ngs were a decent bunch, and Paul's a prince. So is Jo."

"Esther's nice too." She smiled at him over her raised arm.

"Yes, Esther's nice too." He did not look at her and he did not smile.

From the bridge Charlie Browne watched them come on board. Almost at once the *Tai Ming* sailed.

They stayed on deck while Wuchow slid past the Customs *p'ai*, the Customs compound with Angela still at the gate, her handkerchief aflutter, the A.P.C. and the Temple of the God of War among its pines. The Chicken Basket dropped astern and the sun went behind the pagodas. The hills were black against the sky. Primrose went to bath and change. Leaning over the rails Peter watched Wuchow fade into the mists of evening, glad that that episode was finished.

Peter was ready first. Primrose re-appeared wearing the dark frock she had worn their first night on the *Tai Ming*.

"You have been an age."

"I'm sorry, Peter." She held out her hand. "Come and have a cocktail with Charlie Browne and cheer him up."

He hesitated.

"Don't you want to see him, Peter?"

"I want to see him all right. In fact I'm specially anxious to see him."

"Well then . . ." She began to tow him along the deck.

"Wait a minute, pet. I want to see Charlie, but I think I'd rather see him after dinner. After dinner we can stay longer and maybe get him to talk more."

"Talk more? What about?"

"About Chuang's visit to this ship."

"When was that?"

"Wednesday morning. The boat officer on duty at the *p'ai* reported that Chuang went on board at ten o'clock and stayed for the best part of an hour. I want to find out what he talked to Charlie about."

"Why, Peter?"

"Because Chuang is half a dozen people in Hongkong—grocer, wine merchant, jeweller, bus owner, ship owner, buyer of Customs seizures, dealer in fishery products, and God knows what else besides in Macao. I want to know which Chuang I'll have to deal with during my first months

as Deputy. Though I'd just as soon Chuang didn't know I was making inquiries."

"But is it likely he told Charlie?"

"Maybe not in so many words. But Charlie may be able to tell us."

She wrinkled her forehead.

"You mean he might give us a clue without knowing."

"That's it. Chuang said there would be no more smuggling in his ships, because he had plenty other business in Hongkong. I want to find out just what that other business is."

"I see." She pulled him towards the saloon. "All right then, we'll eat first."

After dinner they visited the captain's cabin. At first Charlie busied himself with the duties of host.

"Sugar, Miss Gartrell? Black for you, Mr. Yule?" He fussed over the coffee pot. "I'm glad you came up. I half-expected you for cocktails."

"We would have come for cocktails, Captain Browne, only Peter insisted on having his dinner first." She smiled. "He remembered the good *Tai Ming* food." She stirred her coffee. "It's nice we're able to travel back with you."

"And it's nice to be able to take you back, Miss Gartrell. Being held in Wuchow was not nice at all." He looked at Peter. "Still, I'm glad to be able to assure our new Deputy that there will be no more smuggling in the old *Tai Ming*."

"You're sure of that, Captain Browne?" Peter put down his cup.

Charlie nodded his white head emphatically.

"Certain of it, Mr. Yule." He plucked his sleeve off his wrist and filled his own cup. "And for why? Because I threatened my owners with my resignation if I didn't get their personal guarantee that there would be no recurrence while I was master of this ship. That brought them up with a round turn." He tasted his coffee and smacked his lips. "Good coffee this, if I say it who shouldn't." He put down his cup. "Can I help you to some more, Miss Gartrell?"

"No thank you, Captain Browne. It's delicious but I haven't finished what I've got." She smiled over the rim of her cup. "I hope your owners keep their promise. All this must have been horrid for you."

"It was, Miss Gartrell. Most embarrassing. Something I'm not accustomed to at all. But I can assure you—and Mr. Yule—it will not occur again."

"I'm glad to hear you say so, although I'm surprised you're so positive." Peter sat back in his chair. "What makes you think your owners won't let you down?"

"Ah, now you're asking, Mr. Yule!" Charlie leaned back against his desk. "Now you're asking. A master's relationship with his owners is a very personal one. He's told a lot of things he can't repeat, but, without betraying any secrets, you can take it from me, Mr. Yule, there won't be any more smuggling on the old *Tai Ming*—not while I am in command."

Peter glanced at Primrose, but she had turned to look at the photograph on Charlie's desk.

"It must be pretty lonely sometimes all by yourself, Captain Browne, with no one to talk to except that old pilot of yours." She smiled. "The only time I saw him he didn't seem exactly chatty."

Charlie laughed.

"No indeed. No one could call Ah Li chatty. Still I manage."

"May I have some more coffee now?" She held out her cup. "But, of course, I was forgetting, you do have your chief engineer to talk to, the one that was boring a well for the Customs. I forget his name."

"Ignatief. Ruic Ignatief." Charlie put down the coffee pot. "Now there you've touched on a sore spot, Miss Gartrell. And I don't mind telling you about it if Mr. Yule will promise not to listen."

"Don't mind me, Captain Browne."

"Well, Miss Gartrell, I did hope to pick up Ignatief in Hongkong this trip. In fact I'd made a special point of it in my own mind. Engines, as you can well imagine, aren't improved by lying idle. Now what do you think I was told only three days ago?"

"I can't think." She paused. "Shall I have a guess? Mr. Ignatief has taken to boring wells as a profession."

Charlie slapped his thigh.

"No, no, Miss Gartrell, we can give you no marks for that guess. I haven't seen Ruic yet to find out just how the well went, but, here and now, I'll wager a month's pay that's the last well he'll bore for many a long day."

"Well then I think it's a shame you can't have him back."

"And I'm inclined to agree with you, Miss Gartrell; but, there, I mustn't complain. Ignatief is a good man and, like most Russians he can turn his hand to anything. Now he's

finished this well, they tell me he's blossomed out as a different sort of expert."

"Captain Browne, would I be greedy if I asked for just half a cup more?"

"Not at all, Miss Gartrell. There's plenty in the pot. I was so interested in our little chat, I hadn't noticed your cup. Mr. Yule, some more for you?"

"No thank you, Captain Browne." Peter wished Primrose was not quite so thirsty.

"There now." Charlie replaced the pot. "Where was I? Oh yes. It seems I have to do without my Chief because he's setting up as an expert on charcoal gas engines."

"Well, I think it's a shame. Don't they realise that without him you'll have to do longer hours on the bridge?"

"Now, Mr. Yule, there's a woman will make someone a fine wife." Charlie smiled at Primrose and thrust his hands up to the thumbs in the pockets of his jacket. "Like you, Miss Gartrell, I didn't see why a good engineer should waste his time on charcoal gas engines when he might be looking after engines burning good steam coal—not that we see much of that on the old *Tai Ming* these days. Still, there it is, the buses on the new roads are charcoal burners, and I suppose, someone must look after their engines."

"But surely ships are more important than buses?"

"Well, yes and no." Charlie pursed his lips, his white head cocked on one side. "On the West River, of course, it's ships. But other places it's buses; and, with the Jap blockade of the coastwise junk traffic, why it will be buses more and more—we hope." Charlie had forgotten his coffee. "And we must remember that, with junks cheaper to run than buses, anything that helps the buses compete is that much more important."

"So you've lost your Chief to a wretched bus company?"

"That's what it boils down to, but, mind, it's a good bus company. Well run and law abiding. We can't say the same for the junks, can we, Mr. Yule?"

Peter shook his head.

"So you see, Miss Gartrell, with the junks breaking Customs rules and regulations left, right and centre, and with such a live wire as our new Deputy . . .!" Charlie smiled at Primrose. "Well, we all hope there'll be plenty of junks detained and plenty of junk cargo seized . . ."

"And plenty of seizures for sale, eh Captain Browne?" Peter could not keep the interest out of his voice.

"Ah, now you're asking, Mr. Yule. Now you're asking." Charlie stood away from his desk. He lifted the lid of the coffee pot. "Tut, tut, I'm afraid we've all but run out..."

Primrose glanced at her watch.

"Goodness, Peter, it's after ten. Time I went to bed."

"All right, pet." Peter stood up. "Good-night, Captain Browne and thanks for the coffee."

"Not at all, my boy, not at all. Come again any time." Charlie moved to the cabin door. "Why not come and visit me on the bridge before we dock tomorrow? With the current I have under the old *Tai Ming* tonight, we should be in shortly after tiffin."

Back on the saloon deck Primrose sighed.

"Goodness, I'm full of coffee." She slipped her arm through Peter's. "Did we get what you wanted?"

"You did, and none of it means any good to the junks."

The night was warm. They strolled as far as her cabin door, turned and strolled back to the saloon. The hills crowded in, shutting out the light from the stars. They leaned over the rail and he caught the faint perfume of her hair.

"I wonder, pet, what I should do now? Wait for Chuang to make the first move?"

"Peter, I don't think you should wait. You know now that Chuang means to ruin the junk trade. You aren't going to help him do that, are you?"

"I should say not."

"Then you should tell him so, or you may be involved before you realise it. But you must tell him in the right way."

"How do you mean—in the right way?"

She watched the dark water swirl along the ship's side.

"I suppose Charlie will see Chuang soon after the *Tai Ming* docks?"

"Certain to. As soon as Chuang sees the passenger list, he'll want to hear anything Charlie can tell him."

"Well then, why not send Chuang a message?"

"By Charlie?"

She nodded.

"But I thought we were going to be subtle?"

"Of course we're going to be subtle." She thought for a minute. "Why not visit the bridge tomorrow as Charlie asked you to. Go by yourself. You can say I'm packing. Once on the bridge you say something to Charlie you're sure will stick in his mind. Something that needn't convey much to him, but will be plain enough to Chuang."



"Rather a tall order, pet."

"I don't think so. Charlie's new to the China coast. He'll understand some things, but not everything."

"I see. We want something with a Chinese twist in it."

"That's the idea." She turned her back on the rail. "Didn't you tell me once that John Toogood called bad Customs officials barnacles on the wheels of progress?"

"Yes, he did." Peter laughed. "I suppose I could tell Charlie I don't mean to be a barnacle, specially not on the bottom of a junk." He chuckled. "And that I don't want any crabs on their bottoms either!"

"Peter, that's splendid! That's exactly the sort of thing I meant. Not the barnacle part so much as the crab."

"But pet, do you think Charlie would bother to repeat it?"

"Of course he would. Even Charlie must know Chuang's called the Crab, but, don't you understand, there's something in the message he won't see at all."

"Something he won't see at all?" Peter was puzzled.

"Of course! Peter, what's the Chinese nickname for brother?"

"My brother is 'my hands and feet'." He shook his head.

"It's a nice idea, but I don't see . . . ?"

"And what about the crab's brother?"

"Of course!" He squeezed her arm. "Of course, you clever girl. A crab has no brother. He's his own hands and feet—a selfish creature who cares for nobody but himself."

They began to walk again.

"You see, Peter, Chuang will know when you say 'no crabs on the bottoms of junks' or however you phrase it, that you aren't going to let him grow fat on the ruin of the junk trade—helping himself and caring for nobody. And still more that you aren't going to help him by. . . ."

"By being a crab myself! I said you were a clever girl. Chuang will understand, even if old Charlie doesn't." He stopped by her cabin door.

She reached in and switched on the light.

"Time I went to bed." The light fell on her bunk and on a nightdress of cobwebby blue laid across the corner of the downturned sheet. It shone on her hair.

"I said you were clever." He put his arm round her. "And you're beautiful too. If the Chinese nickname for a man's brother is"

"Peter! Stop!" She put her fingers on his lips. "In another minute you're going to ask me what the Chinese nickname is for sister?"

"Oh, no I wasn't." He looked at the chestnut flecks in her grey eyes. In a little while she would be standing in front of the mirror in that nightie, combing her hair. "Oh no I wasn't. I was going to ask you what the Chinese nickname is for wife."

"Peter..." She sighed. "You shouldn't say things like that unless..."

"But I do mean it." He held her tight. "Aren't you going to answer?"

She looked up at him, her cheek against his shoulder.

"I meant to marry you—ages ago. Ever since the Bachelors' ball. I was only waiting to be asked."

He laughed and kissed her on the mouth.

"And now you've been asked?"

"Yes, Peter—so long as Christopher says yes, too."

"I'll catch the afternoon express to Canton tomorrow..."

"No, no, Peter, I'll do that." She hugged him. "I'm so happy."

He lifted her over the combing into the cabin.

"Now, Peter, you must let me go to bed."

"Can't I stay for a minute?"

"No, not even for a minute."

"Why not?"

"Because it wouldn't be a minute. It's like the Pool of the White Dragon. My body doesn't want to be good. But I do."

"I love you."

"And I love you too, but I'm going to bed by myself!"

Shortly after tiffin Peter climbed the companionway to the bridge. The *Tai Ming* had passed Kap Sui Men. He stood beside Charlie, watching the Peak grow and the harbour open out.

Charlie rocked back on his heels.

"I like running in and out of a British port, Mr. Yule." He sighed. "It reminds me of the old days. It's a beautiful harbour."

"It certainly is." Peter looked up at the Peak. "I'm looking forward to living in Magazine gap. There's a fine view of the harbour from the Deputy's windows."

"You'll be able to keep an eye on the ships."

"And on the junks too, Captain Browne."

Charlie shook his head.

"Ships in plenty, Mr. Yule. The Japs haven't the nerve to stop ships flying the old red duster—not yet anyway. But you'll not be seeing many junks, bar fishing junks."

"I hope I do, Captain Browne, I hope I do. Lying idle in harbour is no better for junks than for ships. They get barnacles on their bottoms." Peter looked at the watery blue eyes. "And maybe crabs, and I don't like either, Captain Browne. Especially I don't like crabs."

"No?" Charlie looked at the green water of the harbour. He remembered another young man in a brass bound coat and peaked cap who, many years ago, had watched blue water slide past with eyes that had caught some of their colour from it, young eyes then and steady. That young man, too, had hoped to steer a course through the shoals which, even then, he saw ahead. "Maybe I see your point of view, Mr. Yule. Maybe I see it better than most." He sighed wearily. "But I wonder do many others?"

"All the people in the Customs,—all the ones who matter,—do." Peter laughed genially. "Maybe, because all of them live in Magazine gap and have the same bird's-eye view of the harbour, and of the ships and junks in it."

"Maybe you're right. Maybe you're right. I wouldn't know. I never get up that high. A steak in the old Hongkong hotel is about my level." Charlie turned his watery blue eyes on Peter. "I might see you once in a way at the hotel—that is if you ever get down that far."

"More than likely, Captain Browne."

Charlie glanced at the helmsman.

"Well, Mr. Yule, we'll be docking soon, so if you don't mind . . ."

"Of course, Captain Browne." They shook hands. "And thanks for looking after us so well."

"Not at all, not at all. You're very welcome any time, and Miss Gartrell too." He turned away. "And don't forget what I said about the hotel."

"I won't."

Down the companionway, Peter began to frown. It was true, of course, that The Tribe lived at the Hongkong hotel, but Charlie could not have been thinking of that. He had been talking for the sake of saying something. His repeated mention of the hotel meant nothing.

Peter rejoined Primrose. They linked arms and strolled along the deck.

"Did it work, Peter?"

"He understood all right. Made no effort to hide the fact. I wonder . . ."

"What, Peter?"

"Oh, nothing. He'll tell Chuang. I'm sure of that."

They stood on the deck to watch the ship dock. As soon as the gangway was in place a flood of coolies poured on board. They made way for nobody, till a tall Chinese carrying a despatch case, reached the foot of the gangway. They made way for him.

"Who's that, Peter? The coolies seem very polite all of a sudden."

"He's the company's agent and hires them—one of Chuang's men." He grinned at her. "So the old rogue should have our message in half an hour. I bet it'll be a shock."

She nodded. The gangway was clear now.

"Shall I go and get my things?"

"No hurry, pet. It's scarcely three. I'll get Te and the luggage, Babetty and the wash amah off on their way up the Peak. Then I'll take you to the station."

"You aren't forgetting I must see my dressmaker?"

"No, pet. There's plenty of time for everything."

Charlie Browne hurried along the deck.

"Ah, there you are. I was afraid you'd have gone ashore." He handed Peter a small parcel wrapped in white paper. "This has just come on board for you." He smiled at Primrose. "You'll excuse me, Miss Gartrell, my agent . . . Good-bye again, Mr. Yule. Good-bye, Miss Gartrell." He hurried away.

Primrose looked at the parcel.

"What do you think's in it?"

"I haven't the foggiest." The neat white folds were stuck down with red sealing wax. They had a Chinese look about them. "Something from the office staff maybe—from some of the clerks who didn't come to see me off last time, perhaps. It's a queer thing to do though. . . ."

"It can't be, Peter. We've been at the gangway all the time. The agent's the only one who's come on board."

"That's right. Queer, isn't it?" He turned it over in his hand.

"Do open it. Look, there's some Chinese written on it." She craned her neck. "And 509 the Peak."

"That's my new address." He read the characters.

"The Chinese is just my name, Mr. Yu, or Mr. Jade, if you like it translated, and *hsiang chiang fu shui wu ssu*—Hongkong Deputy Commissioner. I wonder who on earth . . ."

"Peter, if you don't open it this instant . . .!"

There was a wooden box inside the paper, and, inside the box, a cardboard box, decorated with strips of green and silver tinsel, the lid secured by a strap and a sliver of bone as is the fashion with Chinese jewellers. Inside the box, wrapped in tissue paper, was something hard and smooth about the size of a turkey egg. Peter unwrapped it. When he saw what it was, he all but dropped it."

"A crab! An ivory crab!" Her eyes grew big. "Who on earth . . .?" But there was no need to ask that question. She bit her lip. "Isn't there a message?"

"I can't see any." He fumbled with the packing. "There is something else."

"Here, give it to me." She unwrapped it. "It's only its blackwood stand." She turned it over. "Look! An ivory plaque with more Chinese on it." She held it up. "Can you read what it says?"

He translated over her shoulder.

"The proper man does not forget services rendered."

"The proper man . . .!" He swore. "Give it to me, Primrose. I'll throw the whole damned lot. . . ."

"No, Peter, wait. What does he mean—services rendered? Is it past services, or future?"

"It's hard to tell. Tenses in written Chinese are queer. You can't always be sure." He turned the crab over in his hand. Its legs were flat and oriental. He fitted it onto its stand and stood it on the rail. It squatted there, white, polished, sure of itself. "I could smash it." He groaned. "Chuang guessed I didn't mean to help. He sent this damned thing on board to remind me that, whether I like it or not, I'm a crab like the rest of them—all crabs together. . . ." He picked it up. "I'll show him. . . ."

"No, Peter, don't! Take it home with you."

"Take it home! I'm damned if I will."

"Yes, you will. You'll take it home and put it on your mantelpiece at 509 the Peak. It will remind you every day that you are to help China—not Chuang or his wretched bus company."

"All right." He bundled it and the stand into his pocket. It would remind him all right but, even so, T.L. had delivered his message first.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ON Wednesday evening a week later, Peter and Primrose walked up the stairs to the lounge of the Hongkong hotel. Her plain black frock set off the slim lines of her figure and the pale gold of her hair. By the big mirror doors half way up, she stopped.

"Must powder my nose."

"All right, darling." He smiled. "It looks a pretty cheeky nose tonight."

"I feel cheeky tonight. Who's in the party?"

"The Tribe—and Esther, of course."

"Why of course? Is Esther to be at all our parties?"

"Darling, it's The Tribe's party. Besides I thought you liked Esther. You did in Wuchow."

"Of course I like her—but so do you. Can't I be jealous?"

"You've no reason to be."

"That's what you say. Who else is coming?"

"Henri Bardac—specially from Macao to amuse you. And I've asked John Toogood."

"I'm glad John's coming. I didn't know he knew The Tribe—or Esther."

"He doesn't, but he and The Tribe should meet."

"Does he know Henri?"

"He thinks he does."

"Thinks he does!" She laughed. "Poor Henri, it is a shame! He wants to be French and exciting, and only manages to be French."

"Well, I'm glad I don't have to worry about Henri as a rival."

"Yes, you're lucky. No one's coming tonight who might spoil your party."

"Really, Primrose, what nonsense!"

"It's not nonsense." She tossed her head, because she felt like tossing it and because it suited her hair. "It's true." She disappeared through the mirror doors.

Two naval officers stood at the head of the stairs, obstructing them and the entrance to Bessie's bar, hoping thereby to prove something about their social standing, or about the racial superiority of the Anglo-Saxon. They stopped talking to watch and one of them said, loud enough for Peter to hear:

"Nice bit of stuff that, even if she is feeling a shade temperamental tonight."

Peter looked away.

The Tribe and Esther were coming up the stairs. Esther wore a frock that matched her green eyes. But for them, she belonged against a background of sea, coral sand and coconut palms. Her frock should have been a sarong. It covered little more.

"Hullo Peter." She looked round. "Where's your beloved?"

"In the Ladies."

"I'd better join her."

"All right—only don't be long." He moved aside as The Tribe came up. "It astonishes me, sir, what women find to do in there."

"Does it, Peter?" The Tribe pushed the door open for Esther. "Maybe you're a romantic and think they shouldn't have to. On you go, Esther. We'll wait in the lounge." In the lounge he perched on the arm of a chair. "Well, Peter, so it's official."

"In the *South China* this morning." Peter sat down on a nearby sofa.

"So I saw. Archy Gordon read it out to me. Called it a very sensible choice. I told him it was a damn good-looking choice, far better than I'd expected from you, though I had hoped for some change after a sojourn in Wuchow—even if it was shorter than I intended." His fingers curved round the arm of the chair, their upturned tips beating a tattoo on the loose cover. "Are you a changed man, Peter?"

Peter said nothing. Seeing The Tribe again made him realise how much he had changed, but he wondered what The Tribe would think of the change when he knew more about it.

"By the by, Peter, Frost tells me you're visiting Swabue with him."

"That's right. We've arranged to leave Mankamtao in the patrol wagon tomorrow at daylight."

"Good idea. You'll pass the headquarters of the bus company at Tamshui. Well worth a visit. Charcoal burners, the buses. Very economical to run. Nearly as cheap as junks."

Even in China charcoal is not as cheap as wind, but Peter did not say so. He knew The Tribe would not be so enthusiastic about the trip, if he knew the reason for it.

The morning Peter had reported to the office, Frost had cornered him by the lifts. As he talked, he pinched his cheek between first finger and thumb till the bruised skin reddened.

"I know the Commissioner and Mr. Tribe are enthusiastic about the growing bus traffic, and, of course, the Tamshui Motor Bus company is a reliable firm. No smuggling there, we hope. But things aren't easy for the junks, Yule. Not easy at all."

"What's the trouble, Frost? Jap blockade?"

"That, and the fact that the Customs rules and regulations governing junk traffic were not framed for war conditions. The Inspectorate does not always appreciate that."

"I'll bet they don't. Well, I'm here to help."

"I'm glad to hear you say that." Frost dropped his hand from his blood-stained cheek. "I know there'll be plenty for you to do in your first week. But if you could manage a visit to Swabue . . .?"

"I'd be glad to. What's the trouble?"

"They have three cargo junks detained there."

"What for?"

"The usual thing. Junks can only run the Jap blockade through the T'uniang pass at night, so they omit the call at Sha-ü-chung. You can't blame them. But it's contrary to the rules and regulations."

There and then Peter and Frost arranged to visit Swabue the following Thursday. For himself, Peter decided to see T'uniang pass at night, before he made the trip.

With Primrose in Hongkong on Wednesday for The Tribe's party and for a fitting the next day, the Swabue arrangement was a little awkward. But Peter had persuaded Henri to take leave from Macao for a day or two to keep Primrose company till he returned.

The Tribe crossed his ankles and contemplated the rich sheen of patent leather.

"Why the long silence, Peter? Thinking about the honeymoon to come?"

"No, as a matter of fact, I was thinking about work."

"At the Grips!" The Tribe went on admiring his shoes.

"Anything on your mind?"

"Yes, there is. In fact I brought something to show you in case I got the chance." He glanced towards the stairs.

The Tribe followed his eyes.

"They'll be hours. What is it, Peter?"

"You know I was on patrol on Monday night in T'uniang pass?"

"So I heard. Commander Mordent arranged the trip for you, didn't he?"

"Mordent was very helpful."

Commander Vivian B. Mordent was the Southern Commander, in charge of all Customs cruisers in South China waters. He was a lean Cornishman with blue eyes and lank hair. He had a reputation as a slave driver, but he drove himself as hard as he drove his subordinates, and suffered from stomach ulcers as a result.

"I went in the old *Hoilung*. As you know she's the last vessel we have at sea on junk control. It was very interesting."

"Was it?" The Tribe looked up from his shoes. "See any junks? Or aren't there any left?"

"I saw some fishing junks fishing in the pass under the nose of the Jap destroyer that lurks thereabouts."

"Fishing junks fishing?" The Tribe shook his head. "No interest to us surely." He paused. "If they weren't smuggling, Peter, what was so interesting about them?"

"I watched us shoot them up because the Inspectorate hasn't supplied the cruisers with decent night glasses. That was interesting."

Peter was back on the bridge of the C.P.S. *Hoilung* staring into the velvety dark. For an hour the *Hoilung* had been on patrol in the T'uniang pass. Her bow wave hissed gently as it rolled over on the calm on-coming sea. Streaks of phosphorus glimmered away into the dark. The ship moved gently in the swell, feeling her way forward at half speed. Marine officers on the bridge with Peter stared ahead. Gradually seven or eight small junks, sailing in a scattered group through the pass, appeared, dark shadows on the dark water. Astern of each a quiet wake showed, faintly luminous. They might be innocent fisherfolk. On the other hand they might be . . . ?

The deafening bark of a machine gun blotted out his thoughts, stunning him with its proximity and its menace. The sound was fierce and inhuman. Tracer sprang away from the muzzle and fled out and down in red curves like the lash of some phantastic whip. As their red glow quenched itself in the dark water, it lit up the side of a junk and the upturned startled faces of the men in her, their bodies huddled away from death out of the night. Each man trailed a hand over

the side. They were fisherfolk, trolling under the nose of the Japanese blockader, hoping to escape notice in the dark.

Silence fell, as sudden as the noise and as startling. No one spoke. Peter felt his face crimson with indignation. Machine-gun fire in such circumstances was criminally dangerous. It should be wholly unnecessary.

The Tribe interrupted his thoughts.

"Why the machine-gun fire, Peter? Why didn't they use a searchlight if they couldn't see. The Inspectorate has supplied them with searchlights."

"With a Jap destroyer lurking somewhere ahead? Machine-gun fire was bad enough."

"I still don't see why they fired."

"Neither did I. I asked. The officer responsible said he couldn't see what junks they were, or what they were up to in the dark. If they were smugglers and he hailed them, he was afraid they would scatter." Peter paused bitterly. "Some of our marine staff behave as if all junkmen were smugglers or pirates—till a Lewis gun proves them innocent."

"There have been smugglers and pirates, time out of mind, on the China seas."

"I know—even before the Japs came. Still, we can't justify indiscriminate machine-gun fire at night."

"What are you getting at, Peter?"

"I have it here." He fumbled in the pocket of his mess jacket and pulled out a sheet of foolscap. "This puts it in a nutshell." He unfolded it and read again what he had written. It was short. A good case never needs more than a page. And it would convince anyone open to conviction. He handed the draft to The Tribe. "I want Barr and Stroud C.F. 30s to replace the old worn out Zeiss 6 by 8s." He watched The Tribe read, waiting for his nod of approval.

It did not come. Instead the long fingers flicked disparagingly across the page before tossing it onto the sofa, where it lay, face upwards, the typed words suddenly unconvincing. Even the prescribed end:

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your obedient servant.

had lost point.

"You don't approve?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Why bother with night glasses now?"

"If you'd seen what I saw in the pass on Monday night, you wouldn't ask."

"No?" The Tribe's eyebrows rose cynically. "I generally ask. I'm not easy to convince."

"How can I convince you?"

"You can't." He dusted one shoe with a silk handkerchief.

"And you won't get your Barr and Stroud C.F. 30s."

"Why not?"

"Because we aren't the Royal Navy. We have to think of expense."

"And what about the junks?"

"What about them?"

"Are we to shoot them up every dark night because we can't see who they are or what they are about?"

"We can stop patrolling at night—it's far too dangerous to ourselves as it is—or, better still, the junks can stay the night at Sha-ü-chung."

"They can't stay the night at Sha-ü-chung. Night is the only time they stand a chance of getting through the pass. They're between the devil and the deep sea—between the Jap blockade and starvation. We've got to help—not hinder." Peter was pale and his forehead damp with the effort to keep his voice steady.

"All right, Peter, all right!" The Tribe did not want trouble with his new Preventive Deputy, if it could be avoided. "Let them carry on."

"If they do, then we must control them properly. Otherwise the Inspectorate will begin to kick about the rules and regulations not being enforced according to the letter."

"As Frost probably told you, they're kicking about that already."

"Well then, we must have night glasses, good night glasses, Barr and Stroud C.F. . . ."

"My dear chap! The junk trade is dying. There are fewer and fewer junks at sea. Soon we'll stop using cruisers altogether, even small ones like the *Hoilung*. You aren't suggesting we supply Barr and Stroud binoculars to our thirty-two foot pinnaces?"

"Why not?"

"Because you know as well as I do that if we supplied decent binoculars to the pinnaces, they would be ruined in no time by sand and sea water. Besides, Peter, you can't see

anything from these pinnacles. I know, when I have the misfortune to be in one of them, it spends its time in the trough of the largest possible wave." The Tribe laughed genially. He could joke with Peter about rough seas.

Neither of them suffered from sea sickness. "However, why discuss this with me? I look upon the junk trade as, unfortunately, moribund. But I'm not your Commissioner. If you can convince Archy—and no doubt you can—get him to put it up to the Inspectorate."

"What's the good? You'll comment against it. Useless to put it up if you won't agree."

"Don't agree, Peter. Just don't agree. You must learn to tolerate honest disagreement." His fingers curved round the arm of the chair on which he perched. "However, as it happens, you have nothing to worry about. Esther and I are off to Macao tomorrow. Put your suggestion forward in my absence. If Archy agrees and signs your draft, it will be submitted before I get back and before I can comment. I take it there is nothing unfamiliar to you in this procedure."

"You and Esther are off to Macao tomorrow? That's a bit awkward."

"Why?"

"Well, I've persuaded Henri to stay in Hongkong for a day or two, to keep Primrose company till I get back from Swabue. I'm not sure that she'll think much of the idea as it is. If Henri has to go back . . . ?"

"Why should he go back?"

"Aren't you and Esther staying at his house? If he . . ."

"Nice of you, Peter." The Tribe pulled his big nose. "Nice of you to worry about my reputation—and about Esther's. That's unexpectedly nice of you. But don't let such trifles upset your plans. It won't be the first time Esther and I have shocked Macao society-so-called." The Tribe was glad the conversation had taken a new turn. Binoculars or no binoculars, the junk trade was dying. The Jap blockade, lack of Customs facilities and the growing bus competition—he smiled to himself—would see to that without too much or too obvious help from him. If Peter liked to waste Service money on Barr and Stroud C. F. 30s. what did it matter? "And, speaking of the devil, here's Henri in the flesh." The Tribe glanced down the stairs. "I wonder what those women are up to?"

Peter picked up his draft. It would convince Archy all right. Junks and Customs patrols were complimentary. If the cruisers kept the sea, so would the junks. If one foundered, it would pull the other down. He had a vision of a storm tossed junk and the *Hoilung*, with her high thin funnel and the Customs flag blowing from her stern, caught under the crest of a breaking wave. He stuffed the draft into his pocket. Somehow, with Mordent's help, he must keep the patrols going. Somehow the junks must keep the sea.

As Henri reached the top of the stairs, the mirror doors opened and Primrose and Esther came out.

"Henri, wait for us."

Henri turned.

"Primrose, mon petit, more beautiful than ever!" In the lounge he dragged up a chair for her. "I shall not congratulate Peter. He is too English to understand his good fortune."

Primrose smiled vaguely at the chair, but she sat down on the sofa. Esther joined her.

The Tribe crooked a finger at Olivinski.

"Olivinski!"

"Yes, Mr. Tribe?" Olivinski came forward, tails aswing, a pad in his hand. From an unseen pocket a pencil appeared. Five large menu cards came from under his arm.

"It's all right, Olivinski. I've ordered already."

"Ah yes, Mr. Tribe, of course." Olivinski consulted the list on the back of his pad. "Table No. 12—your usual table. And now?"

"Five martinis." The Tribe turned to Peter. "Or is it six? Toogood is coming, isn't he?"

"I told him eight-fifteen." Peter looked at the ultra modern clock at the end of the lounge. Its numberless face made it difficult to read. "If that's right, he should be here any minute."

"Make it six martinis, Olivinski—very dry."

"Yes sir. At once, sir." The pad and pencil disappeared. With the menu cards under his arm and his tails streaming behind, Olivinski went, weaving his way between sofas and chairs and round groups of people. Like an actor playing a favourite part on a familiar stage, he could not have made a mistake if he had tried.

Toogood, round and uncomfortable in a bum-freezer, came up the stairs. The China Coast mess jacket is not designed for the short and thick. Toogood had done his best but the

jacket was too tight and he did not like it. From behind he looked like some fantastic school-boy.

"Hullo, John." Primrose smiled, but she went on chattering to Esther.

Peter introduced John to the others.

Seated on the arm of Peter's chair, John looked round the party. He smiled absentmindedly at Henri and then he stared at Esther.

"That's Mrs. Van Loon isn't it?"

"Of course. I probably said Esther. What of it?"

"Nothing." John searched for a cheroot in the breast pocket of his mess jacket. "Nothing. Only where's . . . where's . . .?"

"Where's what? Do stop mumbling into your pocket."

"Where's Jo van Loon?"

"Jo? Jo's in Wuchow—where he always is," Peter glanced up. "And there's no need to look so surprised. Esther comes to Hongkong often and often by herself."

"No! You don't say! Who'd have thought it?"

"Well, if you know so much, why look as if you'd seen a ghost?"

"Maybe I have." John rolled his cheroot gently between finger and thumb, listening to its faint crackle. "On my way home from the railway I pass the Y.M.C.A."

"I know that."

"Shortly after six this evening I saw Jo van Loon go in at the front door."

"You saw what? Are you sure? I don't believe it."

Toogood ignored the outburst. He glanced again at Esther.

"Jo knows about this party, I suppose."

"I suppose so. Yes—yes of course he does. He was invited, if that's what you mean."

Peter was puzzled. He wondered if John had made a mistake. Of course, the affair with Esther was as dead as the dodo, but, if there was a fuss, would Primrose believe that? He did not want her upset; and, in her present mood, he certainly did not want a row over Esther. He watched the two women chatting on the sofa, and, remembering what Primrose had said on the stairs, he wondered crossly why she did not sit in Esther's lap.

The Tribe noticed his scowl.

"Why the frown, Peter?"

"No reason, sir. Just thinking." John was smoking and

apparently in no mood to make conversation. Henri needed encouragement. Esther and Primrose were not helping. Primrose especially was not. If something was not done at once, the party would be still-born, and a dull party would not make it easier to tell Primrose about the Swabue trip.

The Tribe too wanted the party to be a success. Food and wine were needed, but the first thing was to break up the conference on the sofa. He unhinged his long body.

"Come on, dear," He held out his hand to Esther. "We'll have the cocktails at the table. You and Primrose can talk clothes another time." He helped her to her feet. "Now you have to entertain us."

Esther knew those sharp eyes and hawk nose so well that she felt a sudden wave of pity for him. All his life Tony planned and schemed as if engaged in an eternal game of chess against a skilful and ruthless opponent. Would he never learn that the shadowy figure on the other side of the board, was nothing but a dim outline of himself?

Primrose took Peter's proffered hand, but, once on her feet, she rejoined Esther. Together the two women crossed the lounge, full now of noise, bustle and laughter. Men and women turned to watch. Walking side by side they set each other off and knew it, and the knowledge added something to them. Esther was dark and mature. Where a woman should curve, she curved. Primrose was cool and fresh. Her hair caught the light and held it captive. She tripped up the steps to the dance floor.

As he followed, Peter glanced towards the orchestra. The Hongkong hotel has two bands, a Philippino band and a Macao band. The Philipinos have the authentic American twang. The Macanese play hockey better than they play dance music, but they are generous with encores. It was the Macao band. Mario da Silva, its leader and first violin, saw someone looking in his direction and showed his even white teeth. Mario smiled easily.

At the table Primrose sat next to Peter, but she talked to Henri. Peter decided that what he needed was a drink.

Olivinski brought the cocktails. Then dinner was served. It was a good dinner. The Tribe had seen to that. There was a Tio Pepi sherry with the hors d'oeuvres and a 1934 Berncastler with the langouiste Neuberg. Dry champagne with the chicken a la Kiev because it was an engagement party and because The Tribe had a cultivated taste in champagne.

After dinner Primrose danced a short encore with Peter. Then she danced with The Tribe. For all his height, The Tribe was a faultless dancer. His comments on things and people made her laugh.

Peter danced with Esther. For an encore the band played 'You're a sweetheart, if there ever was one.' It was a tune Peter and Primrose thought peculiarly their own. Peter glanced across the floor more than once, but Primrose was laughing and talking to The Tribe. She was aware of, but took no notice of his glances.

Peter looked down at Esther.

"You're pretty quiet this evening."

"You're not very chatty yourself."

"I'm tired trying to prod this party into life. What about you? Something on your mind?"

"S'matter of fact there is." She tilted her head. "Maybe it's a guilty conscience, but it feels horribly like woman's intuition to me."

"What about, Esther?"

"Nothing really. Only last Saturday, just as I was leaving on the *Tai Ming*, I realised that I'd forgotten a pattern of silk I wanted to show my dressmaker. I'd left it on my bureau, meaning to put it in my bag. So I asked Jo to send it down by the compradore of the *Tai Hing*."

"What's the trouble? Hasn't he sent it?"

"The *Tai Hing* docked this morning. So far there's no sign of it."

"Is that all! I thought it was something serious. Probably Jo couldn't find it." He smiled. "Or maybe you didn't leave it where you said you did."

"But I did. I left it on my bureau."

"Maybe it blew away."

"Maybe it did. But I don't think so." She glanced about.

"It's not like Jo to say he'd do something and then not do it."

"But if he couldn't find it . . . ?" The music stopped and Peter clapped vigorously. Primrose noticed his enthusiasm. "Anyway, if that's all you have to worry your head over . . ."

"It isn't all."

"No? What else is there?"

Esther danced for a while without replying.

"If he gets a chance, for the first time since he married me, Jo will divorce me."

"What makes you think that?"

"Lots of things—and I know it's true."

"But I thought you wanted a divorce?"

"So I do, but one that's properly arranged. I want someone there, ready to re-marry me at once. Someone who isn't holy—I've had enough of that to last me a lifetime. But, whoever he is, someone who's ready to marry me the minute I'm free."

"Why this unseemly haste?"

"Because the divorced wife of a missionary is nothing but a nothing on the China coast. I've never been that, and I don't intend to begin."

"I see." Peter smiled till he looked into her green eyes. Then he stopped smiling. "You mean that, don't you?"

"Yes I do. If I'm divorced, someone's going to marry me—and quick."

The music stopped and couples began to leave the floor. Esther turned to follow. At the table Toogood stood up and Peter remembered what John had said before dinner.

"Esther!"

"Yes? What is it Peter? Don't stand there gaping. Come and join the others."

"No. Esther, listen a minute." He caught her arm. "Just after he came tonight, John Toogood told me he'd seen Jo this evening on the Kowloon-side."

"He told you what!"

"He told me he'd seen Jo this evening in Kowloon." The dance floor emptied. "He saw him going into the 'Y' about six o'clock. I didn't really believe him till . . ."

"My God!" Esther's hand went to her lips. "Jo always stays at the 'Y' . . . always."

The others had returned to the table. Peter caught Primrose staring in their direction but she looked away.

"Let's go and sit down, Esther. We can't stand here . . ."

"No, Peter, wait." She was between him and the table. "Tell me more."

"There isn't any more to tell. If Jo was in Hongkong, surely he'd let you know. Maybe John made a mistake."

"It's not a mistake. My God, I wonder . . ."

"Maybe he brought the pattern down himself."

"Don't be an ass, Peter. Why should he do that? Besides you know how he hates leaving Squarey alone in Wuchow."

"Well, it's no use worrying. Let's go back to the table and have a drink. I know I could do with one. Jo hasn't anything on us. We've been angels since *Ch'ing Ming*."

At the table, Primrose sat between Henri and John, talking to both of them at once. She smiled at Esther, but she did not look at Peter. The band began to play. Peter leant across to ask her to dance, but she was already on her feet. She went on the floor with Henri. Neither of them took any notice of Peter. John asked Esther to dance. Peter and The Tribe were left by themselves.

"Have some Bollinger, Peter?" The Tribe filled his glass.

"Thanks." Peter drank thirstily.

"It's sacrilege to treat good wine like that."

"I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"You should think. You have a palate for wine—and for women." The Tribe watched Esther dance past. "You shouldn't abuse it."

Peter had followed The Tribe's glance.

"I didn't know I was."

"A little, Peter, a little." The Tribe pulled his long nose. "Drinking good wine quickly is as bad as drinking wines that don't mix. You shouldn't mix wine unwisely—nor women."

Peter laughed uneasily.

"There's no chance of my doing that now."

"I appreciate the now, Peter. I might say I fully appreciate it." The Tribe rolled the stem of his wine glass between his fingers. "And, oddly enough, I believe you. But I wonder would Primrose." He finished the wine in his glass. "And I wonder too about Jo."

"Jo? Jo van Loon? What's Jo got to do with it?"

"Really, Peter!" The Tribe's eyebrows arched. "People do not, as a rule, make the mistake of treating me as if I'd been born yesterday. Who has more to do with it than Jo? Isn't he the husband of one of the women you're inclined to mix?"

"I'm not mixing them. Really I'm not. I've been behaving myself in the most exemplary manner since . . . since . . . for a long time."

"I'm glad to hear it." The Tribe lifted the bottle from the ice bucket and refilled Peter's glass. "Then the fact that Jo was seen this afternoon leaving the offices of Messrs. Spink Thacker and Spink . . . Mind, Peter!" The Tribe steadied the glass Peter had all but overturned. "This Bollinger is far too good to waste on the table-cloth."

The music stopped. Esther and Primrose came back to the table. The Tribe stood up. So did Peter, but he kept his head bent.

'God! Spink Thacker and Spink! Attorneys at law!'

Henri sat at the end of the table, Primrose next to Peter. She saw his brimming glass.

"Peter, you're drinking all the fizz. Do give me some."

"Sorry." Peter reached for the bottle. But Olivinski hurried forward. It was for him to pour wine, especially good wine.

Peter lent across the table to tell Esther about Jo's visit to Messrs. Spink Thacker and Spink. He turned his head so that the others would not hear what he had to say. As he did so, he saw Jo crossing the dance floor.

"Esther . . . Jo!"

"Jo? No! Where?" Her eyes opened wide. She turned to The Tribe. "Tony, here's Jo."

"So it is." He waved. "This is splendid. Why didn't you tell me he was in Hongkong?"

"I didn't know."

"No! No? Extraordinary."

Jo reached the table.

"Hullo folks. Now, don't anyone get up." His extended hands kept the men in their seats. "I don't want to spoil the party."

Olivinski signalled for a chair with upraised finger. He knew an unexpected guest when he saw one. The first thing to do was to get him seated.

Jo sat down.

"I only dropped in for a minute."

"But Jo . . .?" Esther searched frantically in her mind for some explanation. "Where on earth did you spring from?"

"There you are, son!" Jo smiled at Peter. "That's a woman all over. She's forever at me to be social. But when I do turn up unexpectedly for a little jollification, she's struck all of a heap."

Olivinski poured a glass of wine for Mr. van Loon. The close white foam filled the glass to the brim and swelled over it. He stopped pouring and the foam vanished as if it had never been. From the bottom fine gold bubbles streamed up, to burst in a thin mist on the surface.

Jo lifted his glass and nodded to the company.

Esther was not to be put off.

"But, Jo, when did you get here?"

"This morning—on the *Tai Hing*."

The Tribe cut in.

"Have you had dinner?"

"Sure, sure. I had some chow at the 'Y'."

"How did you know we were here?" Peter was as puzzled as Esther, but he showed it less.

"I 'phoned your house. Your Boy said you were out, so I guessed this was the night of the party."

"Come on, Jo." Esther was determined to get some explanation. "You're stalling. There must be something else."

"Sure Esther, sure there is. You ought to know." He felt in his hip pocket and from his note case he took a piece of silk. "Here's the pattern you forgot."

"But Jo..."! She took the piece of silk without looking at it. "I asked you to send it."

"You told me you'd left it on your bureau and asked me to send it down by the next steamer. So, after you'd left, I looked for it and found it. Then I decided to bring it down myself."

"But why, Jo, why?" Esther turned the piece of silk over in her hand. It was the pattern she wanted. "Why didn't you . . .?"

The band began to play.

"Now I'm here folks, I want to see everyone enjoying themselves. There's poor Mr. Bardac off on his own at the top of the table. Someone must dance with him. Come on, Primrose, maybe he is only a Frenchman, but . . ."

Henri sprang to his feet.

"But, Jo, I've just danced with Henri. I want. . ."

"Now, now, be a good girl. Peter must stay and talk to me. And you mustn't disappoint Mr. Bardac."

Still protesting, Primrose was dragged onto the floor.

The Tribe watched with interest. There was always a reason for people acting out of character.

"And me, Jo? Do I dance with Esther?"

"Sure, Tribe, sure. Why not? I'm not a dancing man."

The Tribe's eyebrows arched.

"Leastwise, not tonight. And Toogood here would always rather smoke than dance. He'll be happy with a big cigar, while Peter and I have a talk."

The Tribe bowed to Esther. He grew formally polite when

he sensed trouble. Esther joined him on the floor. They danced towards the band.

"What's he here for?" The Tribe looked down. "He never comes to the Grips, even when he is in Hongkong. What's going on?" His eyes were unwinking, impersonal.

"How should I know?"

"What's all this about a piece of silk?"

"That's true enough. I did forget it and I did leave it on my bureau where he said he found it, but I asked him to send it down by the compradore of the *Tai Hing*."

"Why didn't he?"

She did not reply.

"There must be something more."

Esther shook her head. She did not know and she did not want to discuss it. Discussing Jo with The Tribe made her ashamed.

"Come on, Esther, think. There must be something more to this piece of silk. You're sure you asked him to send it?"

"Don't be an ass, Tony! Why should I ask him to do anything else? It's not even particularly important. I liked the colour. I thought maybe I'd have a frock that shade for Government House." Her mind ran back to the previous Saturday. "Of course, I asked him to send it. There was no reason for asking him to bring it. I told him it was on the bureau and that's where . . ."

"And he looked for it and found it and then he decided to bring it himself. There's something missing. What's Jo hiding?"

"Jo doesn't hide things."

"No?"

"No, he doesn't. He says what he means—when he's ready." She hesitated. "Only, when it's going to be unpleasant, sometimes he let's you guess what he's going to say—before he says it. . . . to make things easier. . . ." She paused, baffled.

"Maybe that's what he's doing now. Come to think of it, there was something odd in the way he produced that piece of silk—like a rabbit out of a hat—as if it explained everything."

"You're being awfully clever, Tony, aren't you? But there wasn't anything odd about it. It was the piece of silk I forgot, and it was the piece of silk I left on the bureau. And that's where he said he found it—on my bureau."

"He did not." The Tribe bent his head, the eyes on either

side of his hawk nose bright and hard. "He did not say where he found it. But you have. You've said it three times, repeating it because already you know it isn't true." He stared at her. "You don't believe it yourself now."

"I do! Don't be an ass, Tony, of course I do. The silk was on the bureau. I distinctly remember. I took it out of my bottom drawer meaning to put it in my handbag . . . " She bit her lip. "Oh Tony! Oh my God! Oh what a fool! Of course it wasn't on the bureau. Oh, Tony that's it!"

"What's it?" The Tribe's eyes seemed closer together than ever.

"I can't tell you here. Too many people. Walk me towards the Ladies. I'll tell you on the way." She looked up at him, wondering what he would do when he knew. He was concerned in this, whether he liked it or not. The Tribe's eyes were bright like a bird's, and a bird's eyes have the lidless unwavering quality of the eyes of a snake. There was no need to ask herself questions. Left to himself, Tony would do exactly nothing at all.

They went down the steps to the lounge. The band stopped playing and Olivinski passed them with a box of Corona Coronas for Mr. Toogood.

At the table John lit a cigar and sat back in his chair. Parties like this bored him. Of course the food had been excellent and Jo and Peter were real people—he had no use for the other kind—but still he was bored. That chap Bardac was a fool. He felt better when he did not have to look at him. He took the cigar out of his mouth and examined the growing white ash. It was a change from Manila cheroots. He put it back in his mouth and blew a cloud of smoke ceilingwards.

Peter watched Jo wondering what would happen next. Jo watched the dancers, his eyes twinkling. Jo was an unusual missionary. He thought music, laughter and youth, good things in themselves. He even thought young people ought to dance. He danced himself. His attention wandered to the band. He caught sight of the leader.

"Say, Peter, there's Mario da Silva, their centre forward."

"For God's sake, Jo whose centre forward?"

"Macao's—their grass hockey team's." To an American the word hockey means ice hockey. The other game, despised as something fit only for school-girls—till they see it played abroad—needs the additional adjective.

"Grass hockey? Oh, I see." Peter tried to sound interested. "Do they play much?"

"Do they play much? Say, where have you been all your life?" The music stopped. "Come and meet the boys. They'll tell you."

Peter followed Jo between the tables. He knew now that Jo had something to say to him.

Before they reached the orchestra, the band began to play again. Mario smiled and nodded to Jo over his violin.

When the music stopped, Jo looked them over.

"Well, boys!" A wave of his hand indicated Peter. "My ignorant friend here wants to know if you guys play hockey."

The band smiled, flattered by Mr. van Loon's interest.

"Go on, Mario, you tell him."

"Sure we play." Mario showed his even teeth.

"Sure we play!" Jo mocked. "Sure we play! What's gotten into you, Mario?" He turned to Peter. "Say, no one's ever beaten them. All these guys play on the team. Take on all comers, any time." He looked again at Mario. "When you playing next?"

"Next Sunday, Mr. Jo. Next Sunday at Macao against the China Fleet."

"And you beat 'em before, didn't you?"

Mario nodded.

"And you'll beat them again?"

"Sure, Mr. Jo, sure. We win every time just like you say." Mario smiled at the boast. "Maybe you come to Macao to watch?"

"No, Mario, no can. Got to get back to my hospital tomorrow."

Peter glanced up, trying to guess the reason for so short a visit, undertaken so unexpectedly.

Jo went on.

"Maybe Mrs. van Loon will be in Macao, Sunday. She might come and watch. She likes a trip to Macao now and again."

"Sure, Mr. Jo, sure. I know." Mario gave his attention to his violin. Mrs. van Loon's trips to Macao with Mr. Tribe, to stay at M. Bardac's residence—sometimes when M. Bardac was not at home—were too well known and too much talked about for Mario to speak of them to her husband, and in front of his band, without embarrassment. He thumbed the strings of his violin.

Jo sympathized. Esther was enough to embarrass anyone. Right now she embarrassed him, and she would shortly be the cause of further embarrassment when he talked to Peter. He

had come all the way from Wuchow for this. There was nothing to be gained by further postponement.

The dancers had returned to the tables. Peter and Jo were alone.

Beyond the band two hinged doors, marked IN and OUT, led to the hotel kitchens. The doors swung to and fro as a stream of Boys passed through, their trays empty or loaded according to the door they used. Sometimes a waiter in tails, Olivinski or one of his minions, broke through the stream, like a salmon shouldering his way through a shoal of trout.

Jo moved towards the IN door.

"And that's another thing I got to attend to before I go back."

"What's that?" Peter wondered uneasily what the others had been, and about Jo's visit to Messrs Spink, Thacker and Spink.

"I got to see the Number One Cook."

"Whatever for?"

"About his daughter's head." Jo sighed. "Cook's a Wuchow man. Three days ago his daughter came into hospital with a tumour on her brain." Jo ran lean fingers through his tuft of grey hair. "Leastwise, Doc Squarey thinks it's a tumour. He wants to use his knife to find out. So I got to see Cook about his daughter's head."

Peter nodded. He did not think he was expected to say anything. He looked at the cockatoo of ruffled hair and wished Jo would come to the point.

"And, son, there's another thing. That bit of silk . . ."

"Yes, Jo, what about it?" Peter knew that, whatever it was, this was it.

"That bit of silk was there all right." Jo spoke slowly, almost apologetically. "But it wasn't on the bureau. It was in it—in the bottom drawer." He paused. "Mind you, Esther doesn't mean great harm, but she's careless, and she forgets things. I had to rummage for that bit of silk." Jo looked at Peter and sighed. "Son, I have sharp eyes and a good memory. You write a terrible hand—once seen never forgotten. I recognized it the minute I saw it." He shook his head. "Esther had no business with those chits, but you had no business writing them."

Peter put his hand on a chair to steady himself.

"And, I'm not judging. The Lord would not have us sit judgment on one another. I ought not to have married

Esther in the first place. That was hiding one sin with another. Besides, I had work to do she could not help me with, and, I guess, she loved—and maybe still loves—someone else. But I've paid for it, and, it just so happens, that this spring it has come to me that I have paid enough. I don't believe in divorce. But I believe now it is a greater sin for me and Esther to go on living together as man and wife. So I'm going to divorce her. Your chits, son" Jo looked tired and unhappy, but the purpose in his voice was clear.

"I see." Peter licked his lips. The back of his throat was parched. Divorce! Named co-respondent in an out-port scandal with the wife of a missionary! Chits produced in evidence, some of them written only a month before the public announcement of his engagement! It would be the end. He swallowed painfully.

Jo watched with sharp, kind eyes.

"I'm terribly sorry, son. Most of all I'm sorry for Primrose. She's a sweet girl and I believe you love her." Jo smiled faintly. "Mind, I'm human. I looked at those chits to make sure they'd all been written before she came to Wuchow to stay with Paul. I'd have been real angry with you if you'd played fast and loose with Primrose."

"What are you going to do?" Peter's voice was so low, Jo sensed rather than heard it.

"Right now? Nothing. I've seen a lawyer—I had to do that—but he wants a lot of papers signing and such, and I can't stay for that. Not now I can't. Squarey might operate while I'm away. So, tomorrow, I go back to Wuchow to keep an eye on him. I won't be here again for a month and I won't sign anything till I get back. If you want to tell me anything before . . . before" Jo's voice trailed away. "Anyway, son, you talk to Primrose and you write me." He gave Peter's arm a squeeze and moved towards the door marked IN. The Boys made surprised way for him. "Now I got to go see Cook about his daughter's head." Jo went through the swing door, followed by a Boy carrying a tray of empty dishes.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE telephone beside Peter's bed began to ring. It rang while he fumbled in the morning dark.

"Yes?"

"Is that you, Yule?" Frost's cheerful voice made Peter's head throb. "I thought I'd better call you in case Mr. Tribe's party was late."

"What time is it?" Peter's tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth.

"Turned five o'clock. Just time for breakfast before you catch the six o'clock ferry."

"Breakfast!" Peter's stomach turned over. He sat up and a weight banged against the inside of his skull. "Six o'clock ferry! That's a bit early."

"Not if we're to leave here at first light."

"Where are you speaking from?"

"Shumchun Headquarters. I slept here last night. I'll meet you at Mankamtao at seven."

"Who else is coming?"

"Two frontier guards and Mr. Kwok."

"Kwok Ku Piao? I thought Cowper was at Sha-ü-chung."

"So he is. But he knows all about northbound junks and he's sure to know something about these three at Swabue."

"Is he with you now?"

"No. We're to pick him up at Lungkong."

"All right. I'll hurry."

In the bathroom Peter grimaced sourly at his reflection while memories of the previous night crowded round unbidden. It had been impossible to explain Jo's sudden disappearance. To The Tribe's question he had replied:

"Jo? Jo's gone to see Cook about his daughter's head." But even to Peter his reply had sounded impossibly surrealist.

He stared at himself. What on earth was he to do? He must tell Primrose, and tell her quickly. If he did not, someone else would. Things like that got round. He washed his teeth. Of course, Esther might have something to say. Esther might even expect him to. . . . He stared at his foam-rimmed mouth. But it was too early, and he had drunk too much to concentrate. He rinsed his mouth. Jo had given him a month; and in a month anything might happen. Peter hoped devoutly that something would.

He caught the six o'clock ferry with half a minute to spare. Crossing the harbour he switched off his headlights and took down the canvas top. Climbing the hills behind Kowloon, he drove with his head clear of the windscreen, hoping to blow the cobwebs from his eyes. Despite the previous evening, speed and the fresh air of morning lifted his spirit.

It was a long drive to Swabue and it would be uncomfortable in the patrol wagon. There were two ferries to cross. But Swabue was a China port untouched by treaties, unequal or otherwise. From time immemorial it had been famous for its junks, its fishmarket, its salt pans and its Middle School. An emperor of the Yuan dynasty had commended the school in an imperial rescript. The wolfram scrapes, of course, were new, but little else would have changed since the Mongol Khans sat on the Dragon Throne.

Now, anchored in Swabue harbour were three junks, masters and crew waiting for the Hongkong *fu shui wu ssu*. Junks were a part of old China, like imperial rescripts, imperial examinations for trembling Middle School scholars and imperial officials. Some officials helped, some hindered. Whatever The Tribe thought, and even at some risk to himself, Peter had made up his mind to help. John Toogood and Primrose would approve, and so would Jo—and Jo had given him a month.

Shatin and Taipo were behind him. He pressed the accelerator and swept over Fanling crossroads, past the Hunters Arms and his old bungalow. He was glad Cowper Kwok was coming. Cowper would see the men and things behind the rules. If rules had to be broken, Cowper would be on the side of the angels. Frost might side with the rules.

At Sheungshui police station he forked right onto the frontier road. The wind from the hills was cool, but his mouth was dry. He reached the Shumchun river and bumped over Mankamtao bridge. A black and white pole swung up at his approach. Beyond the road barrier stood the grey patrol wagon and, waiting nearby, were two frontier guards in their faded uniforms.

Peter slid his car to the side of the road, opened the door and stuck his feet out. He was in khaki shirt and shorts, the zipper of his leather jerkin undone.

Frost came out of the matshed station followed by the tidewaiter-in-charge.

"'Morning, Frost." Peter looked at the tidewaiter. "Any water, Mr. Dumn? I'm dying for a drink."

The tidewaiter turned to one of the station guards.

Frost pinched his cheek.

"We ought to be getting along, Yule. It will take us all day."

"In a minute. My mouth's like the bottom of a bird cage."

The guard brought the water in a dripping tumbler. As he drank, Peter looked at the countryside. The first rice crop stood green in the fields, the early morning sun glittering on the water between the stalks. On the higher ground were rectangles of tall sugar cane, good cover for smugglers—and planted close to the frontier for that reason. The villages between Shumchun and the foothills of Ng T'ung Shan combine mixed farming with all the year round smuggling.

Peter returned the glass.

"Ready now, Frost."

They crossed the road to the Fordson. *Customs Patrol Wagon* was painted on one side in English, and in Chinese on the other. Frost climbed into the driver's seat. Peter settled down beside him. The two guards scrambled up behind. Frost let in the clutch. At Shumchun Market they turned right. The Tamshui road, red as a Devon lane, stretched ahead of them across the plain to Ng T'ung Shan. Lungkong was a dozen miles away. Tamshui as far again.

Twice, before they reached Lungkong, motor buses swayed past in clouds of red dust, their open windows crowded with faces, cloth bundles and rolls of matting piled on the roof. Wicker baskets, full of live chickens, hung at the back, and, wedged between the front mudguards and the bonnet, were pigs in split bamboo crates, miserably still. No one, least of all the makers, has any conception of the capacity of a vehicle till they have seen it in use on the new roads of China.

They topped a hill and Lungkong lay below. The pawn shop and the magistrate's yamen stood out above the grey-blue tiles of the houses. Nothing in China is more Chinese than the gay upturned roofs. They met Kwok near the yamen in his ill-fitting jodhpurs and leather coat.

As the wagon slowed down, Peter leaned out.

"Morning, Cowper. How did you get here so early?"

"On Kowloon Yat." He nodded at the yamen. "I've parked him on the magistrate."

"Well, climb in behind. Mr. Frost's in a hurry."

They reached Tamshui and the headquarters of the Tamshui Motor Bus company. They did not stop. At Pingshan, Peter took over. The road skirts the walls of Pingshan;

solid walls mellow with age, and turns seaward through hills covered with coarse grass and occasional scrub pines to Bias bay. At Fan Lo Kong they reached the sea. The place smelt of smugglers and pirates. They stopped for tiffin at Hoi Moon ferry. The ferry is a large junk driven by a small diesel engine. They chugged across. The ferryman charged them one dollar big money.

At Hoifeng they turned sharp right onto the Swabue road. Shortly after three, they reached the Tse To Shan ferry. Kwok went in search of the three sampans used to ferry buses across. The guards found a tea shop and bought themselves tea and sweet cakes. Peter and Frost sat on a stone ramp that led down to the water. A flock of wild geese flew overhead towards the nearby marsh, the wind whistling in their pinions. There was an-end-of-the-world feel about the place.

Twenty minutes passed. Kwok came back, followed by the sampanmen poling their craft from the direction of the marsh. The sampans were lashed side by side and two grooved planks for the wagon's wheels, laid across them. The sampanmen pushed the contraption into place at the foot of the ramp.

Peter looked at it and then at Kwok.

Kwok showed his gold-filled teeth.

A bus fell in last week."

"I'm not surprised. I wonder they all don't. How much do they want?"

"Three dollars small money."

"But that's more than the Hoi Moon ferry."

Sure. I told them so. They said their ferry was more dangerous."

"So we pay more!" Peter climbed into the driver's seat. "Oh well, so long as everything holds together..."

Remembering the previous week, the crowd closed in hopefully. With each sampanman shouting different directions, Peter drove down the ramp and onto the sampans. They rocked and swayed and he waited for them to overturn or drift apart. But, because it was a Chinese improvisation in China—where it is improvise or perish—they did neither. The crew pushed off. The wind caught the wagon and swung it round. Crab-fashion they made their way across.

From Tse To Shan the road is good, but it was after four when Honghai bay and Cheliang point came into sight. Swabue is at the base of Cheliang. They reached the bus

"The Service sampan is over there. We might as well take a look."

"All right."

Another red-sashed boatman rowed them out in a grey painted sampan.

The junks were obvious traders, with Kowloon Customs numbers in white on a black background on their flattened bows. They boarded the outermost junk first. She carried coal dust. The one in the middle, the Pinghoi junk, had native cotton piece-goods and iron bars. The one lying inshore was No. 70026. She was loaded with good quality building materials, cement, expanded metal and bricks.

From the deck of No. 70026 Peter looked back at the other two. The letter of the law might have been infringed, but there had been no deliberate attempt to defraud the revenue. Building materials of whatever quality, coal dust, and iron rods are never smuggled. They are too bulky, too cheap and the duty is too low. The import tax on everything he had seen could not be more than \$500.

The crews collected amidships. They knew who he was—the *ta jen, fu shui wen ssu*, come from Hongkong to decide their fate. They looked in silence, and with them looked their ancestors. None of the Sons of Han can foretell what an official will do. All one can do is look and hope.

Peter shrugged his shoulders.

"There's nothing here for us to see, Frost."

Frost nodded.

Back in the sampan, the boatman pushed off. Mr. Station Watcher Li looked at his junks.

"All, Mr. Deputy Commissioner, detained for 'failing to present a full and correct manifest of all goods carried at the first Customs station met en route. The minimum fine, under Clause 21. . . ."

"Yes, yes, Mr. Li, we've heard that already. By first station, I take it, you mean Sha-ü-chung?"

"Yes, respected sir."

Peter looked at Kwok.

"Know anything about them, Cowper?"

"Sure. I checked their pass books in the office, Mr. Li is right. They didn't call at Sha-ü-chung."

"Why not?"

Kwok shrugged his shoulders.

"I guess they stood out to sea to give the Jap destroyer in T'unang pass the slip."

"And why not, Cowper? In Heaven's name why not? You know as well as I do, that the pass is no place for an honest trader." Peter thought of his last patrol there. "Besides, they turned up here eventually. That should be enough. They never meant to smuggle all that bulky cargo. You know that as well as I do."

"Sure, Mr. Yule, sure I know. But does the Inspectorate?"

"To hell with the Inspectorate!"

Frost started and his hand went to his cheek. Yule should not talk like that, particularly before subordinates.

The sweeps creaked in the dry thole pins. Drops from the blades tinkled on the water and made a recurring pattern on the smooth surface. The breathing of the boatman sounded loud. The light began to go.

"Have these three been in trouble before, Cowper?"

"No, Mr. Yule, no trouble at all, though, according to their pass books, they've been trading between Swabue, Hongkong and Canton for years. I remember No. 70026 myself when I was the in-charge at Taishan. The junkmaster's name is Hop Li. He and his junk are from Swabue."

"He has an old number."

"He's been trading a long time." Kwok paused. "None of them has been trading much recently."

"I bet they haven't, poor devils. Do you know the names of the other two?"

"Hop Lo Hon—he's Hop Li's younger brother; and Ho Ma Ch'un. He's from Pinghoi. So is his junk."

"So I noticed. How long since No. 70026 was in Chinese waters?"

"Three months—according to his pass book. He'll have been lying in Hongkong waiting for cargo."

"Waiting, hoping and starving." Peter turned to Station Watcher Li. "By the by, Mr. Li, where are the junkmasters? I didn't see them on board."

"Just come back today by bus."

"By bus? Where from?"

"From Hongkong, Mr. Deputy Commissioner."

"What on earth were they doing in Hongkong?"

"Sir, borrowing money."

"What for, Mr. Li?"

"To pay minimum fines."

"How much?"

Everyone in the sampan looked at Station Watcher Li. Even the boatman rested on his sweeps.

"Each junk \$1,000, minimum fine—total \$3,000."

"Three thousand dollars!" Peter stared. Had this Station Watcher Li no bowels of mercy for his own people? "Where in the name of God...?"

Kwok spoke for the rules and regulations.

"According to the law, Mr. Yule, the fines are O.K. The junks didn't call at Sha-ü-chung like they ought to have done."

"I know, I know. We've had all that before. But where in the name of God could the poor sods get three thousand dollars? Where could they get three hundred? Their junks are all they've got."

Mr. Station Watcher Li mumbled under his breath:

"Clause 21, Paragraph 2, Sub-heading B: minimum fine \$1,000. Less no can."

Peter ignored him. At the pier they disembarked and walked up the beach. In the station Peter turned to Kwok.

"What about beds tonight, Cowper?"

"The guards have taken our grips to the inn. I told them to book rooms on the top floor."

"Any chance of hot water for a rub down and a bottle of cold beer?"

Frost nodded.

"I could do with a cold beer. My throat's full of dust."

Kwok smiled doubtfully. Hot water perhaps, but cold beer in Swabue....?

Peter crossed to the other door.

"Well, let's go and look see." He stepped into the shadowy lane and stumbled against two Chinese hesitating on the threshold; one short and fat; the other tall and thin. "*Chieh kuang; chieh kuang!*" He broke into polite apology.

"Do not mention it, Mr. Deputy Yule." The short fat figure stepped aside. "We were in search of you. The people at the inn told us you were detained at the Custom House." The English was correct, but slowly spoken.

Peter looked inquiringly at Station Watcher Li.

"Sir, and Mr. Deputy Commissioner: this is Mr. Postmaster Ma."

The short fat figure bowed.

"For many years Mr. Ma has been postmaster at Swabue."

"And this, respected sir, is Mr. Schoolmaster Lo." The tall figure moved into the light from the door. And Li's

mouth stayed open as if he would add some detail about Mr. Schoolmaster Lo—but, by and by, he shut it.

"Mr. Ma." Peter bowed. "Mr. Lo." He bowed again. "We are just now on our way to the inn. Perhaps you will walk along with us."

They dropped into step. Mr. Ma had a brisk business-like air, but Mr. Lo spoke first.

"I think, Mr Deputy Yule, I should explain myself." Mr. Lo spoke with the same rusty accuracy as his companion.

"Yes, Mr. Lo?"

"I have the misfortune to be the owner, or at least the consignee, of the building materials on detained junk No. 70026." He sighed. "They were to build a new wing for Swabue Middle school."

"I see." Peter looked at the thin amiable face. "I'm sorry to hear it. Yours is a famous school. You do not look like a law breaker, Mr. Lo."

"Indeed, I am not one. But the law has been broken on my behalf by Hop Li, the junkmaster. Mr. Station Watcher Li has explained this very carefully—many times." Mr. Lo looked at the ground before his feet. "Hop Li thought only of the safe delivery of my cargo. He is a common man, but honest."

"But he broke a rule and the rules are written in Chinese in his pass book."

Mr. Lo sighed.

"So Mr. Station Watcher Li has shown me, also, alas, many times. It is regrettable. The materials are urgently needed. I have eaten bitterness."

They turned into the main street. It was wide and some daylight lingered in it.

Mr. Ma took over.

"On your way here, Mr. Deputy Yule, you will have passed through Shumchun Market."

"Not quite, Mr. Ma, though we passed close to it. You know Shumchun well?"

"Very well. I was postmaster there for many years." He glanced back at Frost who was walking behind with Kwok and Li. "I remember the Chief Tidesurveyor when he first came to Kowloon as a Boat Officer, and, from time to time, I met other important Customs officials who visited Shumchun, once even the Inspector-General, Sir Andrew Anderson, when Mr. Gordon, now your Commissioner, was but a Senior Assistant." Mr. Ma smiled happily. "That was many years ago."

"You have spent many honourable years in a sister service, Mr. Ma."

"Alas no! So far I have wasted a mere thirty."

Mr. Ma did not look forty years old, but Peter was too polite to say so.

They crossed the road and stopped by a lane that led down to the inn. Mr. Ma waved at a row of empty stalls further down the street.

"Swabue town fish market, Mr. Yule. Famous for its prawns, but most famous for its *shek paan*—what is called garoupa fish in the Hongkong hotel."

"I've heard about the *shek paan*."

"Then tonight you would like fresh baked *shek paan*?"

"Indeed I would, if..."

"It is arranged." He turned to his companion. "It is arranged, Mr. Lo, is it not?"

"Indeed yes." Mr. Lo bowed over his folded hands. "If Mr. Deputy Yule will honour us with his company, I believe the Lok T'ien restaurant..."

Peter looked from one to the other.

"Come now, you two, what is all this?"

Mr. Lo waited for Mr. Ma.

"Mr. Deputy Yule, Lo *hsien sheng* and myself would be honoured if you would dine with us at the Lok T'ien *ta chiu tien* tonight. It is the Number One restaurant in Swabue. The food will be inferior, but..."

"I'm sure it will be excellent."

Frost came up.

"Frost, you know Mr. Ma?"

Frost nodded.

"He, and Mr. Lo here, want us to dine with them tonight."

"And Mr. Kwok, and, of course, Mr. Station Watcher Li." Mr. Ma added hastily. "A table for nine is already ordered."

"What do you say, Frost? It sounds like a party."

"Any fresh prawns, Mr. Ma, and will they be fried?" Over Mr. Ma's shoulder, Frost explained to Peter. "Nobody fries prawns like Swabue cooks."

Mr. Ma turned to Mr. Lo.

"Fried prawns are ordered, Mr. Lo, are they not?"

"Already ordered, Mr. Ma."

"There you are, Frost! You can't think of anything they haven't thought of already. After that drive I could do with some good food and something cold to drink. And so could you." Peter bowed to Mr. Ma and Mr. Lo. "Thank you

gentlemen. On behalf of myself and my companions, I accept with pleasure."

Mr. Ma and Mr. Lo removed their hats and bowed in return.

"We shall come for you at seven." They bowed again and went off down the street.

The prospect of a free dinner did not seem to please Mr. Station Watcher Li. He took himself off in the opposite direction.

"I wonder what his trouble is?" Peter watched him go.

Frost and Kwok went down the lane towards the inn.

Their rooms were on the third floor. The beds were polished bamboo covered with cheerful padded quilts. The sheets were coarse but clean. Oil lamps, made in Germany, stood on bedside tables. There were British-American Tobacco company calendars on the walls of Chinese maidens with impossibly red cheeks.

An inn servant brought a wooden bucket of hot water and put it in an annexe that jutted from the inn wall. Peter stood on a stool and poured scalding water from a tin dipper over his body till it was bright red. The waste ran through a hole in the wall and splashed into a back yard close to a urinal. The users of this place looked up, interested. Perhaps the falling water encouraged them.

By the time Mr. Ma and Mr. Lo returned, Peter was clean and dressed. He felt hungry and thirsty and better than he had felt all day. They left the inn and walked through the narrow streets, fresh with the chill air from the sea. Through an open door came the click-clack of majong tiles, and, behind a closed shutter, a girl giggled. The streets were unlit, as they would have been in fifteenth century Europe, but Swabue was not asleep. Peter tasted salt on his lips and thought wistfully of cold beer.

The ground floor of the Lok T'ien *ta chiu tien* was crowded with fisherfolk, junkmen and coolies drinking coarse green tea, eating sweet cakes and gossiping. When Postmaster Ma came in with two foreigners, followed by School Master Lo and a strange Customs officer, the noise and bustle dwindled to a common stare.

Servants came forward and the party climbed four flights of stairs to the fifth floor. Like Americans, the Chinese count the ground floor as the first. The fifth floor was a single room at the top of the building with windows facing four ways. There was a row of chairs against each wall and, on each wall, were painted mirrors. In the centre of the room

was a round table covered with a cloth and surrounded by high stools.

Mr. Station Watcher Li was already there, seated in the middle of a row of chairs, splitting melon seeds between his front teeth and sucking out the flimsy kernels. The husks fell to a floor already littered with them. Mr. Li stood up, but he continued to split the currant seed between his teeth. Melon seeds are not a food. They are an occupation.

Against the wall, opposite Mr. Li, sat three dark visaged Chinese. Their heads were freshly cropped, and their coolie cloth jackets, ironed to a glossy creaselessness, stood out from their big bodies. But for their jackets and the party shine on their copper smooth faces, they would have seemed more at home on the ground floor. They stood up when Mr. Li stood up, and bowed when he bowed. Two of them were tall men, though the one in the middle was a good inch taller than his companion, and looked older. The third man was stocky and he had a hare-lip that gaped to show one white tooth. The hands of all of them were the hands of workmen, and their eyes were the eyes of men who live in the open. They did not smile, and, when they sat down, their attention returned to a door which led to the kitchens. They did not look like diners-out, but at least they knew where the food came from, and showed a natural interest therein.

The table was laid for nine people. There were nine painted eating bowls, nine sets of bone chopsticks wrapped in cheap paper napkins, and nine china spoons with flat bottoms and short curved handles. There were nine clusters of shallow dishes filled with native condiments, soy sauce, Chinese mustard and tomato ketchup.

Peter glanced round the room. The three unknowns must be fellow guests, asked no doubt to make up numbers. Nine was a lucky number for a Chinese dinner party.

Mr. Ma interrupted his thoughts.

"Come to the north window, Mr. Deputy Yulc." Chinese habitually use a compass bearing to indicate direction. It is not open to misunderstanding and the compass is a Chinese discovery. "There is a fine view of the harbour and the lagoon."

The night was clear and starlit. The town lay in darkness, but dim junks rode at anchor in the harbour. Beyond and above them, lights winked from the wolfram scrapes. To the left stretched the pale sheet of the lagoon. From the salt

pans a dog barked. Night magnified the sound. Peter stared into the dark, wondering about China. China was a big country for one man to help.

Mr. Ma was at his elbow again.

"Now, Mr. Deputy Yule, I am sure you are thirsty after your long drive!"

Peter turned. Kwok and Lo were helping Station Watcher Li with the melon seeds. The interest of the three unknowns was still on the door to the kitchens. Frost wandered about the room by himself, looking at the painted mirrors, a glass marked with froth in his hand. Mr. Ma held out another glass and a bottle of beer.

"Beer, Mr. Ma?" Peter watched the glass frost with cold. "And cold beer at that! Never saw anything I liked the look of better." He glanced across the room. "I see Frost has stolen a march on me." He held the glass to the light. "Is this going to taste good, Mr. Ma, or is it going to taste good!"

"*Kan pei, fu shui wu ssu.*"

"*Kan pei* it is." Peter put the glass to his lips and drank it dry.

Mr. Ma refilled it and handed the empty bottle to one of the servants. The servant said something and Mr. Ma turned to Peter.

"Mr. Yule." He motioned to the table. "Dinner is ready."

"After you, Mr. Ma."

The three unknowns converged on the high stools, jostling politely for the inferior places. They arranged themselves in a solid block opposite Peter, the tallest in the middle. As one man they turned their heads to watch the door to the kitchens. Mr. Ma and Mr. Lo sat on either side of Peter; Station Watcher Li and Kwok, beyond Lo; Frost on the other side of Ma.

Peter picked up the menu. The first column on the right read: 'The Fifth day of the Fifth Moon, at eight p.m.'; the second column: 'On the fifth floor of the Lok T'ien *ta chiu tien*.' Twelve columns followed, listing twelve separate dishes. The characters were poorly formed and the paper and ink inferior.

Mr. Ma passed the menu to Frost.

"Fortunately, the Lok T'ien cook cooks better than he writes," Mr. Ma smiled, "and, we hope, with better materials."

A servant placed the first dish in the centre of the table. It was sharks fin soup served in a pewter chafing dish. There was a pause. Mr. Ma caught Peter's attention and picked up his china spoon. Peter followed suit. Together the spoons approached the soup, Mr. Ma's urging Peter's on, Peter's lagging politely. In the end Mr. Ma filled Peter's bowl. He would not allow Peter to return the compliment. Other spoons and bowls followed, each guest half rising from his stool to help himself. The three unknowns waited till last, but they made up for waiting. The room was filled with the cheerful noise of hot soup eaten with gusto. After each mouthful the three unknowns smacked their lips. Whoever was paying for their dinner, they meant to enjoy it. Fresh supplies of beer arrived, and, against a background of encouraging noise, talk became general.

The empty soup dish was moved to one side, and the next dish, ducklings cooked in a sweet sauce, took its place. Mr. Ma tapped his chopsticks on the table and led Peter forward. The ducklings were broken apart. Mr. Ma picked out titbits for Peter. This time Peter was allowed to return the compliment. He raised himself from his stool, and, with the fingers of his left hand resting on his right wrist, conveyed the chosen morsel in his chopsticks to Mr. Ma. Mr. Ma held out his bowl in both hands. They bowed. The three unknowns helped everyone within reach, but they kept their own bowls in the background. Only when Station Watcher Li had accepted a gift from each of them, did they help themselves.

The next course was soup made from chicken livers, pork, walnuts, raisins, groundnuts, sultanas and bamboo shoots. It was served in the upturned half of a vegetable marrow in which it had been cooked. The spoons of the three unknowns cut generous slices from the inside of the marrow till everyone's bowl was filled. The soup was hot and more beer was drunk. The noise of eating, and, with it, the volume of talk, grew.

A servant brought round a tray of rolled towels. They were scented with Florida water and piping hot. Peter wiped his face and hands and felt refreshed. Before the tray reached them, the three unknowns undid the frogs of their jackets, and, when it came to their turn, they took two towels apiece. They wiped their faces, the backs of their necks and their heads till they shone like polished bronze. The towel they used under their arms, down to their bellies

and round their trouser tops. It was as good as a bath. The one with the hare-lip belched till it quivered.

Another servant came round with a wooden bowl of country rice, each grain clean and separate, as boiled rice should be. Steam rose in clouds as he filled the nine bowls with a massive wooden spoon.

Peter looked at his bowl and glanced to his left.

"Don't forget to leave a nook for those prawns of yours, Mr. Frost."

"I won't. Mr. Ma tells me they're next."

The prawns lived up to their reputation. Frost had said no more than the truth about Swabue prawns and Swabue cooks.

Dishes began to arrive in quick succession; stewed pigeons, fried frogs legs, two kinds of dressed crab, sweet and sour pork, crisp squares of roast duck skin, chicken swimming in broth and stuffed with birds' nests. The chicken was delicious but the pace was beginning to tell. Only the three unknowns had bellies without bottom.

Shek paan the *specialité de la maison*, the Hongkong hotel's garoupa fish, was served in the fish-shaped dish in which it had been baked. Peter looked at it and waited for Mr. Ma. To his surprise the tallest of the three unknowns rose to his feet. Using his chopsticks with skill, he divided the firm white flesh from the backbone. He looked across the table. Peter hesitated. Then he half rose from his stool and held out his bowl. The titbit was placed ceremoniously on the top of his rice. Everyone watched except Station Watcher Li. Mr. Ma and Mr. Lo seemed specially interested. No one of the unknowns had helped Peter before.

The *shek paan* tasted as only sea-fresh fish can taste. Peter began eating from politeness but he ended by helping himself to more. Other chopsticks searched with his for bits of back. Honest eating was a thing of the past.

Calls for rice became infrequent. A Chinese trencherman is judged by the number of bowls of rice he eats. Peter had eaten three. Mr. Ma filled his bowl again, but Peter looked impotently at it.

The last dish meant to be eaten, honey soup with lotus seeds, was put on the table. The three unknowns finished it. They sucked their teeth and belched. Their faces and chests shone with moisture and satisfaction. This was a feast. From the first they had meant to be *ch'ih pao lo*—stuffed. They had achieved their object. Plainly, they hoped others had been as fortunate.

soon reply, Peter smoothed the table cloth with the bottom of his tumbler. He did not look up.

Mr. Ma ended on a patriotic note.

"Japan is the villain. Take away the Japanese aggressor and all will be well. Take away the blockade and honest traders will not fall foul of the Customs in their efforts to escape the common foe."

Mr. Ma sat down. Everyone looked at Peter. From the beginning the eyes of the three junkmasters had not left his face.

Peter's belly was full of food and drink on which the junkmasters must have spent their last cash. Since the afternoon, his heart had been on their side. This Gordian knot of red tape must be loosed. But how? If he cut it, there would be trouble. He believed in his hosts and he meant to be of service to them, but...? He stood up and looked at Mr. Lo.

"I would not willingly retard the building of your school, Mr. Lo. Rules have been broken but times are difficult and the rules are not well suited to them." He looked at Cowper Kwok. "I accept Mr. Ma's suggestion that some compromise must be found."

Kwok nodded, but his face was serious. If Peter ignored the rules in his first months as Deputy, he risked his career.

Mr. Ma took advantage of the pause to interpret to the three stolid faces across the table. They did not change. They knew how little they had to offer towards a compromise.

"Now, Mr. Ma, will you please ask them how much they were able to raise in Hongkong?" Peter glanced at Hop Li. "That is, if they managed to raise anything at all."

Hop Li answered in the broad dialect of Swabue.

"He says \$500 Hongkong."

"Five hundred Hongkong dollars each?" It was an agreeable surprise.

"No. I am afraid only a total of five hundred."

"I see." Peter hesitated. "Perhaps our friend Mr. Lo could raise another hundred?"

Mr. Lo nodded.

"For me, it is possible. My school trustees..."

Mr. Ma looked round the table.

"So we have a grand total of six hundred dollars Hongkong to offer Mr. Deputy Commissioner Yule."

"You mean to offer the Customs, Mr. Ma." Peter moved his glass to one side. "And on behalf of the Customs, I

accept. I shall release the junks on a token deposit of \$200 Hongkong each, and on my return to the head office, I shall advise the Commissioner to mark the offence by a token fine of not more than \$100 each. If that is approved—and I'm sure it will be—" Peter did not look at Frost. "Mr. Station Watcher Li will have the pleasure of returning \$300 for re-distribution to those concerned."

Mr. Li winced. A coach and four had been driven through his rules and regulations, and he was asked to like it. But he said nothing. He was too busy composing a letter to the Chief Tidesurveyor on the poor state of health of his grandmother in Canton. Only immediate leave would save what little was left of his face.

While Mr. Ma interpreted, the tray of hot towels was brought round again. Peter wiped his face. He was suddenly tired.

The junkmasters stood up. They bowed. Hop Li spoke for them, and as he translated, Mr. Ma nodded approval.

"Hop Li says: he and his brother Hop Lo Hon and wife's first cousin Ho, are forever grateful. The *fu shui wu ssu, ta jen*, is their mother and father. Three times they knock head, and now this cheap and unworthy meal is finished, they pray to be excused."

"Cheap and unworthy!" Peter searched for words to express his disagreement. But the junkmasters were already on their way to the door. Twice they paused to bow, deep old-fashioned bows, as if they meant to fulfil their promise and kowtow. From the landing they bowed again. The feeling of strain that had been in the room went down the stairs after them.

Station Watcher Li took his leave. Out of earshot he muttered to himself:

"Minimum fine \$1,000; Preventive Law of the Republic of China; Clause 21, Paragraph 2, Sub-heading B. Minimum fine. Less no can."

But no one cared what Station Watcher Li muttered to himself on his way home through the narrow streets of Swabue Town.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BABETTY raced down the path, through a gap in the mangroves, on to the hard damp sand of Big Wave bay. Peter and Primrose followed, carrying surf boards. Henri Bardac came behind with two Hongkong baskets. He paused to read a notice warning bathers against swimming in rough weather.

Peter glanced back.

"Come on, Henri. There's no sense reading that now. The South West monsoon hasn't started yet."

"Besides, just look at it!" Primrose dropped her teak board on the sand. "There's scarcely a ripple." The light wind ruffled her hair. In her shorts and suntop she was slim and graceful. "There never are any big waves when Peter brings me here."

Henri looked at her and at the rock-strewn bay. He felt out of it. He was not a strong swimmer, and, left to himself, he would not have come. It was Saturday afternoon. With The Tribe and Esther at his house for the week-end, he should have gone back to Macao. It was only polite,—and politic. Peter had said that The Tribe would not give a damn. Henri wondered if Peter knew The Tribe as well as he thought he did. Besides, why did Peter want him at Big Wave? Henri looked at Primrose. Englishmen were queer, but not as queer as that.

"Don't worry, pet." Peter picked up her board. "We'll go out on the rocks to the left. We can dive from them. The water's very deep."

"What about me?" Henri joined them. "I have not webbed feet."

Peter whistled.

"Come on, Babetty. Come on, Primrose. Maybe Henri will drown." It was a pointless remark. Henri was with them only because Peter had urged him to come.

They set off across the sand. Babetty raced along the edge of the water. She danced away from the waves that broke and spread up the beach, pretending she did not want her paws wet. One wave, swifter than the others, swept round her. She plunged in barking and swam out to a ledge of rock. On the ledge she shook herself. Spray fanned

out from her body and made a rainbow in the afternoon sunlight.

They clambered after her. On the ledge they changed into bathing costumes and sat with their feet dangling over the water. Primrose sat in the middle. Her legs were smooth and the colour of honey. The hair on Henri's legs was black, and under the hair the skin was white and unsunned. He looked what he was, a Frenchman who never undressed in company, except in a bedroom.

The light swell moved along the ledge, smooth, green and inviting. The water was deep but Primrose could see shells here and there on the sandy bottom. She pulled on a white bathing cap and tucked her ears away.

"Come on, Peter." She stood up. "Let's swim while it's hot."

Peter dived after her. As he came to the surface, he glanced back. Henri was lowering himself cautiously into the water. Already he was yards away. There was no object in bringing Henri to Big Wave, if they left him.

Primrose rolled on her back and looked at the sun. She kicked her legs, paddling steadily seawards. She lifted her head to watch Peter swimming beside her. Henri was out of earshot.

"Peter. . . ?"

"Yes, Primrose?"

"Haven't you anything to tell me? I haven't seen you since The Tribe's party."

"I have—lots, especially about my Swabue trip. But I want old Henri to hear too. That's why I brought him along."

"Oh, that was it." She sighed. "I wondered what it was."

"You don't mind old Henri, do you?"

"Oh no. Why should I?"

"No reason. I just wondered." He watched her basking in the moving water. "Shall we go back? He'll never swim out this far."

"As you like." She turned and swam towards the ledge.

Babetty swam to meet them. Primrose clambered up and stood on the ledge, drying herself. Flowerlike she turned towards the sun.

Henri had finished his swim. He opened one of the Hongkong baskets and took out a thermos flask.

Peter climbed out of the water with Babetty.

"Get away, bitch!" He flicked her with his towel. "It's

early yet for tea, Henri. We only came back really so that I could tell you about my Swabue trip."

"As you choose, mon vieux." Henri screwed the top of the flask on again. He was thirsty from the salt water he had swallowed. He wrapped his towel round his middle and sat on the bare rock with his knees up. Peter had always some story to tell. It should not be necessary. There were rules. If one followed the rules, there would be no story.

Primrose spread her towel and lay down. She slipped off her shoulder straps and propped her chin on her hands. Her back dimpled. Like her legs, it was young and beautiful.

Once they had settled themselves, Peter told them about the drive to Swabue and about the two ferries. Primrose smiled over the ferry which cost more because it was more dangerous. He told them about Swabue Town, knowing Primrose felt as he did about unchanging China.

When he came to the junks and the junkmasters, he spoke to Henri. He knew Primrose would see Hop Li and younger brother Hop Lo Hon and wife's first cousin Ho—hare-lip and all—as he saw them. But it was not Primrose he had to convince. He told about the dinner party, and about Frost's look of dismay when he realised who had paid for it. He repeated Mr. Ma's speech, word for word. He would have improved on it, if he could.

Henri listened with his head bent. He examined his feet, massaging between the toes. From his massaging he obtained results which seemed to absorb his whole attention.

"And so, mon vieux, what did you decide?"

"I decided to release them on token deposits. In the office this morning, I got Archy to agree to token fines and to sign the seizure reports."

"Mon dieu, you have been quick!"

"I don't want any trouble. The sooner the business is finished and done with, the better."

"And what does M. Gordon think of token fines? There is no mention of. . ."

"I know." Peter interrupted. "But you know Archy. I don't suppose he liked them. But he signed. It was easier, and Archy takes the easy way, if he can."

Henri sucked his knees. The Tribe cared nothing for easy ways. Even Peter must know that. And The Tribe was no junk partisan. Henri stopped sucking his knees. They only e him thirstier. Besides, his mind was made up. He d catch the Macao boat tomorrow. He did not

want The Tribe to connect him with this Swabue nonsense.

"So Hop Li and the others will trade again?" Primrose had waited for Henri to have his say.

"Are trading, pet. As soon as Station Watcher Li took their deposits—that was before we left Swabue—they were free to sail."

"I am glad." Primrose glanced at Henri. "But I wonder what Mr. Tribe will say to all this."

Henri did not reply. Rules and regulations were made to be observed. He took pleasure in observing them. He had no wish to be involved in risks taken by people who did not.

"The Tribe?" Peter began to wish he had let Henri go back to Macao. "The Tribe won't think anything, because he won't know anything. Once they are signed, seizure reports go only to the Inspectorate."

"I hope it's all right." Primrose prodded an inoffensive limpet with a pink finger. "I'm glad the junks are trading again. . . . But I hope it's all right." Feeling its security menaced, the limpet clutched mother rock, but Primrose went on prodding. "I don't want you sent up country again, Peter,—to Tengyueh, or somewhere frightful." She gave the limpet a final prod. "And I don't want you to miss having your rank confirmed." She looked at him with her large grey eyes.

Peter rolled over and kissed her finger.

"And I don't want to go to Tengyueh either—much too far away from you. But everything will be all right. The Tribe won't know anything, and, even if he finds out, I shan't mind. I have ignored the rules and regulations, but with my eyes open. The rules are not well suited to the times."

Henri thought that, if things went wrong for Peter this time, it would not be a matter of losing his acting rank or being transferred to some outlandish spot like Tengyueh. But he said nothing.

While Peter and Primrose amused themselves diving from the ledge, Henri unpacked the tea. Setting out the cups, he decided to catch the morning boat. Those Basque parents of his had been right. One must choose one's friends with care.

Peter and Primrose joined him. After tea they swam again. The water was milky warm, but the sun went behind a hill and the air grew cold. They swam to the beach and ran along the water's edge, Babetty barking at their heels.

"Stop. . . stop!" Primrose dropped into a walk. "I

can't run any more." She took Peter's hand and they turned back. "Get down, Babetty-bo." She liked the lean feel of his fingers but she was not sure whether she wanted to kiss him or smack him. "Peter?"

"Yes, pet?"

"You haven't forgotten that I'm catching the express tomorrow morning?"

"I wish you didn't have to."

"I know, but Christopher'd miss me if I wasn't home for Sunday."

"I see." He glanced towards the ledge where Henri was putting away the tea things. "When will you be down again?"

"Not before the Governor's ball."

"But that's a month away!" It wasn't the only thing a month away.

"I know."

"It is a nuisance." Peter looked at her. Her white bathing costume suited the warm gold of her skin. He remembered that green costume of Esther's which did more than justice to the little it covered. Primrose's costume did not make him blink. He could not explain about the impending divorce without talking about Esther, and, worse still, answering questions about her. No one who looked like Primrose could be expected to understand. He saw her grey eyes watching him. "Darling, I scarcely seem to have seen you."

"That's not my fault, Peter. I've been here since Wednesday."

"I know, Primrose, but I couldn't put off my Swabue trip. Really, I couldn't."

"Of course you couldn't, and I wouldn't have wanted you to." She was glad he had gone and glad he had sided with the junks, but, all the same, the Swabue trip was a nuisance. It had taken him away and now it monopolized the conversation no matter what she did. She sighed. "I do hope there isn't going to be any trouble over it."

"There won't be any trouble. And, even if there is, I can face it. I did the right thing."

"I'm sure you did and I'm glad you feel like that." She squeezed his fingers. "All the same I don't want anything to stop you being confirmed Deputy." Her eyes looked into his. "Because you know, Peter, I'm going to marry you whatever happens."

"I know, darling." He kissed her.

She kissed him in return but now she was sure a hard smack would do him good.

Henri was cold from sitting still, and, seeing them warm with exercise, made him colder still. He was puzzled, too. There seemed to be no reason at all for his presence except that he had set out the tea things and packed them up again. He took his clothes behind a rock to dress. Pulling on his trousers, he decided that he would catch the first steamer to Macao, even if he had to get up at six o'clock the following morning.

They dressed and scrambled back over the rocks. They walked up the path from the beach to Peter's car. He drove them to the Sheko club where they had supper. It was a long drive to Government House, where Primrose was staying with Sir William and Lady Turpin, and there was a moon, so, before they started, Peter took the top down. Primrose sat between them. By and by she fell asleep with her head on Peter's shoulder. He moved to make her comfortable. She knew it in her sleep and rubbed her cheek against the rough tweed of his jacket. The clean smell of her hair blew round his face. When he kissed her goodnight on the steps of Government House her lips were soft and warm with sleep.

"You won't come in, Peter?"

"No, pet, I'm not dressed. Besides, Henri wants to get to bed."

"Henri's a nuisance."

"Not really, Primrose. He's just a Basque."

"He's still a nuisance, and I shan't see you for a whole month."

"Nonsense! I'll come for you tomorrow morning to take you to the train."

"You'd have to come awfully early. Tom Backhouse can take me. That's what A.D.C.'s are for."

"That snake in human form! I should say not. It's me you're marrying."

"Yes, Peter, it's you I'm marrying." She put both arms round his neck and kissed him again, but she knew there would be no time to talk between Government House and the railway station.

Shortly after nine on Monday morning, Peter sat in his office drafting his smuggling report. While he searched for the appropriate adjective to describe Kwok's work at Sha-uchung, he gazed at his butterfly doors. Beyond them he

could see the floor of the corridor that led to the General office. As he stared, a pair of legs appeared below the doors. The legs were encased in trousers, round as drainpipes and as creaseless. Below the trousers were feet, plainly flat, heels together, toes pointing in the first position of the dance, like the bottom half of the walrus in Alice in Wonderland. A black stick stood away from the legs, a curious stick, curiously carved. The legs were only just outside the door. Chuang's pedunculated eyes must be peering through the slats.

"Come in, Mr. Chuang."

One half of the doors opened and a moon-like face appeared.

"Come in, if you want to see me."

Chuang came in. He skirted the left-hand wall till he reached the desk. He sat down and the inevitable felt hat dropped onto Peter's 'in' tray. Two flat hands clasped the top of the narwhal horn.

"I very afraid, Mister Deputy Commissioner, very afraid you too busy now to see me." T.L. fixed his eyes on the wall behind Peter's head.

"I'm not so busy as all that, Mr. Chuang. What can I do for you?"

"Mister Frost tell me, come and see you."

"Oh—what for?"

"For junk cargo seized at Swabue. Mister Frost tell me only you savvy why no man can buy."

"I see." Peter played with his pencil. His eye caught Kwok's name in the smuggling report. The Kwok Ku Piao's of life would be on his side, and John Toogood and Primrose—and Jo. He knew it was his own fault, but he wished thinking of Primrose did not mean thinking of Jo.

Chuang and The Tribe would be against him.

Some people, like Frost and Archy Gordon, would sit on the fence. But Peter suffered from no messianic complex. He saw no reason why people should not sit on the fence in a row if they wished to. It was frequently the sensible thing to do.

And Henri? Peter smiled grimly. On Sunday Te had brought him a chit with his morning tea. The chit said that Henri found it necessary to catch the first available boat to Macao. It gave no reason, and Peter needed none.

Peter remembered the old Chinese proverb: 'Lose your r and show your enemy where to attack you.' He his pencil and looked up. This time there would ay of temper.

"Well, Mr. Chuang, you can't buy cargo seized from junks at Swabue for the simple reason that there isn't any." He paused. "But I can offer you some sugar, kerosene and matches taken from smugglers in the Mankamtao bridge area."

"Mister Yule!" One flat hand left the stick long enough to put the Mankamtao seizures where they belonged. "Mister Yule, must be cargo from junks at Swabue. Must be. I savvy; some cheap coal, some building materials. . . ."

Peter understood. Coal dust for making charcoal for charcoal-burning buses. Building materials for building new bus depots. It was a neat plan and Peter understood T.L.'s chagrin that it had failed.

"Sorry, Mr. Chuang." He smiled, but he shook his head at the unwinking protuberant eyes. "I know the cargo you mean, but it was released on deposit last week. Final settlement of the case will, I hope, be made at Swabue today or tomorrow on payment of the fines imposed by the Commissioner."

"Payment of fines? How can?" Chuang shook his head. "How can?" His hands wrapped themselves round the top of his stick. The light from the window caught the jade seal of his ring. "Junkmasters no got money. No can borrow in Hongkong. No can borrow enough."

Peter understood that, too. Junkmasters travelling on buses belonging to T. L. Chuang, would find it difficult to borrow money in Hongkong when their only assets were detained junks carrying cargo. Chuang meant to buy cheap.

"Well, Mr. Chuang, the junkmasters did manage to raise enough to satisfy the Commissioner."

"How can? How can? Five hundred dollars not enough." Chuang stared at Peter. "You savvy rules, Mister Deputy Commissioner. Must have three thousand dollars; less no can. You savvy rules.—" The words came slowly. "Fine not less than one thousand dollars, you savvy. Not less than one thousand dollars—for each."

Peter heard the creak of sweeps in thole pins. The light that caught the ring was the last light of evening in Swabue harbour. He wondered if he was the only person left in South China, who did not make a practice of quoting Customs rules and regulations.

"You remember the wording of the regulations well, Mr. Chuang, but this time there were extenuating circumstances. The minimum fines imposed by law were not enforced."

T. L. Chuang sat still, absorbing what Peter had said. Then he stood up. He put on his hat and waddled out. At the door he did not turn to bow. He had learnt what he wanted to know. He had pressing business elsewhere.

Peter watched the doors swing to and fro, tremble on their hinges and come to a stop. He wondered what T. L.'s next move would be. That there would be a next move and that it would be made immediately, he had no doubt.

He turned to his smuggling report, and for two hours he worked at it. Shortly after twelve he glanced up at the clock over his door. He might as well go round to the Cricket club for an early tiffin. After tiffin he would finish the report.

He left Marina House and walked along Queen's road. The tiffin was good and he sat on the verandah afterwards, looking over the neat turf to the far corner of the ground, where club servants were putting up nets for the afternoon batting practice. The big bulk of The Peak made a natural backdrop. From where he sat, he could see the Commissioner's house in Magazine Gap and his own just above it. He had a cup of coffee and turned over the pages of a month-old Sketch.

Back on the fourth floor of Marina House, he glanced at the clock over the lifts. It was barely two. He had the whole afternoon to finish his report. As he strolled into the General office, Frost's butterfly doors opened and Frost put his head out.

"Ah, there you are, Yule. They said they thought you'd gone for an early tiffin. The Commissioner is waiting for you." Frost's hand went to his cheek. "He hasn't had his tiffin yet."

"Waiting for me?" Peter turned back. Archy's office was at the end of the corridor beyond the lifts. "I wonder what's the matter now?"

"Something about the Swabue junks." Frost kneaded his cheek. "The Commissioner seemed upset." He nodded blankly and vanished into his office. The doors swung to behind him.

Peter went on past the lifts. Frost's blank look had not disturbed him. He had known all along that Frost would not side with him.

The *t'ingch'ai* outside the Commissioner's door stood up. Peter knocked and went in. Archy Gordon was behind the big glass-topped desk. His flannel suit sagged on his bony frame and the knot of his tie did not hide his collar stud. A

telegram lay on the blotter in front of him. Otherwise the desk was bare.

"Ah, there you are, Yule. Everyone's been hunting for you." He made it sound as if Peter had been missing for a week. "I've had to delay my tiffin."

"I'm sorry, sir. What is it. . .?"

"This." Archy picked up the telegram by one corner. "It came express an hour ago." He held it out. "You'd better read it for yourself."

It was in code, the decoded message written above each code group in Rosemary Lee's round inviting hand. Miss Lee was the Commissioner's stenotypist.

"Telegraphic report received that contrary to the rules

"and regulations governing junk traffic three junks

"detained at Swabue have been released on payment of

"token fines stop report at once by telegram stop in the

"meantime junks on no account to be released.

"Anderson, I.G."

"Isn't that typical!" Peter laughed dryly. "What's the good of telling us not to release the junks, when, if the report is true, they've been released already? If it isn't true. . ."

"That's all very well, Yule, but, unfortunately, the report is true. The junks have been released, and it is only too evident that the I.G. does not approve of what you've done."

The person of the pronoun did not surprise Peter.

"Yes, sir. That's plain enough."

Archy walked to the window and stared out. Even his back looked worried. A car, like a shiny black beetle, threaded a hesitant path through the rickshas and pedestrians on Queen's road. The harsh impatience of its horn rose faintly to the window.

"I wonder who telegraphed Sir Andrew?" Archy returned to his desk. "Have you any idea, Yule?"

Peter opened his mouth to reply, but he realised in time that if T. L.'s name was mentioned, Archy would capitulate without a struggle.

"Well, Yule?" The Commissioner waited. "Any idea who's at the back of this?"

"Probably someone who wanted to buy the detained cargo cheap. He's annoyed he didn't get the chance."

"Yes, I see that. Any idea who?"

"One of the regular buyers, I expect. They're a nosey lot."

"Yes. Yes, I suppose they are. Funny thing to do

though, wire the I.G. Deuced awkward. You'll have to draft a reply, of course."

"Of course." Peter glanced at the clock above the door. "You'll be going for tiffin. I'll have the draft ready. . . ."

"No, no. I'd rather you did it now and I'll initial it before I leave." Archy liked a game of golf at Deep Water Bay on Monday afternoons. It prolonged the weekend. "Then you can get it off at once."

"All right, sir." Peter leaned over the desk, fiddling with a pencil. He scribbled three words, crossed them out and began again. His pencil gained confidence as he wrote. He pushed the telegram across the desk. "Will that do?"

"No, no, you read it to me. No one can decipher your scrawl."

Peter glanced at what he had written.

"Your telegram number so and so : rules and regulations governing junk traffic not wholly suited to wartime conditions stop consider it impossible, and inadvisable, to enforce them *in toto* stop explanatory despatch follows immediately. Gordon."

"It's not an answer to the I.G.'s telegram, Yule. I'd really rather. . . ."

"I'll answer it fully in my despatch."

"Yes, but can you answer it to the I.G.'s satisfaction?"

"I think I can."

Archy picked up the telegram.

"Well, I suppose it's all right, if you think so. . . ." He initialled what Peter had written. "But mind you, Yule, I don't like it. I don't like it at all." He crossed the room to get his hat. "When will you draft the despatch?"

"This afternoon, sir. I'll enclose copies of the seizure reports, explain how and why I acted as I did, and end by asking for the I.G.'s approval."

"How long will it take you, Peter?" The burden was slipping from Archy's shoulders.

"An hour. Maybe two."

"You can have it typed out ready for me to sign first thing tomorrow morning?"

"This afternoon, sir, if you like."

"No, no, I'd rather sleep on it."

"I understand." Peter had remembered the Monday afternoon golf.

"I'll sign it first thing tomorrow morning, Peter. That is, of course, if I approve of it."

"Of course, sir. I'll have it typed out ready for you." It was a good arrangement. Peter wanted to get the smuggling report out of the way before he settled down to the despatch.

Archy Gordon wandered to the door. At the threshold he hesitated as if he would say something, thought better of it and went out, leaving the door ajar.

Peter picked up the telegram and followed. Under pressure some people went woolly. Perhaps they could not help it. He would not go woolly. Under pressure his will to resist would stiffen. He meant to fight and enjoy fighting.

He shut the door and crossed the corridor to the secretary's office in search of Miss Lee. As he expected, she was in front of her typewriter by the window.

Rosemary Lee was a Canadian-born Chinese, and, like her fiancé, a returned student from Toronto University. She spoke her native Cantonese with a Canadian accent, but her face, and, under her flowered silk gown, her high small breasts were unmistakably Chinese. She looked her best in Chinese clothes. She glanced up as Peter came towards her and smiled to show her even white teeth. Miss Lee liked working with the new Deputy. He knew what he wanted.

"You want me, Mr. Yule?" Her lips were red and plump.

"Yes, Miss Lee." Peter had decided against calling her Rosemary. "And I want the code."

"I have it here." She stretched across her typewriter, glad, being born in Canada, she had not acquired the Chinese habit of binding her breasts. Men liked them to show. "I had it out to decode a telegram for the Commissioner."

"So I gathered. It's a reply to that telegram I want to code."

They encoded it together. After she had typed out the code groups, he checked them through and signed B/O Commissioner of Customs.

"Now, Miss Lee, I don't expect the Commissioner will be back this afternoon, so, if you've nothing on, I can use you."

"Yes, Mr. Yule." Rosemary Lee was quite ready to be used.

"First of all, get this telegram off express. In the meantime, I'll get on with my smuggling report. I'll have it for you before I go for my tea. Sometime after tea I'll be ready to dictate the despatch about the Swabue junks. By five thirty or so, I expect. . . ."

"Five thirty! Oh dear. . . .!"

"What's the trouble?"

"Jimmy generally takes me to the five o'clock movie Mondays." She smiled. "But it doesn't matter. I'll call him on the phone and tell him it's the seven o'clock show or nothing. Jimmy won't mind. In Canada he learnt to do what the girl wants. I wouldn't be marrying him else."

"Then that's settled. I'll ring for you shortly after four."

"I'll be in all afternoon if you need me."

Peter went back to his office. He was not worried. More than once he had considered putting the case for the junks on paper. It was a good case. When they read what he had to say, the Inspectorate would realise that for themselves. Once they understood the position, they would approve of what he had done.

Because the Commissioner was out, Peter's work was interrupted, so that it was nearly half past four when he rang for Miss Lee. As soon as he heard the tap tap of her high heels along the corridor, he pushed back his chair. He met her at the door.

"I'm a bit behind, Miss Lee." He handed her the draft of his smuggling report. "But I'll be ready to dictate the despatch by five thirty, I hope. I'm off now for my tea."

"Don't hurry your tea for me, Mr. Yule. Jimmy says the seven o'clock show is O.K. by him."

"Thanks, then I won't."

They walked together to the lifts. Miss Lee's gown was split to the knee. Her stockings were American and expensive. With so promising a split, they had to be.

Peter walked down Queen's road, the despatch already taking shape in his head. At the Cricket Club he ordered tea and a toasted bun. He sat on the club steps to enjoy it. Some young men in the service of the Hongkong Government were already at the nets. Peter watched idly, wondering why anyone paid salaries to such lilies of the field.

In the office again, he found Miss Lee had put copies of the seizure reports on his desk. She was as efficient as she was provocative. No doubt, with marriage only a few months away, warm looks from other men were pleasurably exciting. He glanced through the reports, recalling details. His mind was clear. He knew what he wanted to say and how to say it. He began to write.

"It is no fault of the junkmasters." He saw Hop Li and Hop Lo Hon and wife's first cousin Ho bowing themselves out of the fifth floor of the *Lok T'ien ta chiu tien*. "that

the Customs stations, at which in time of peace they were accustomed to report— island stations like Taishan and Samun—are now occupied or invested by the Japanese. They cannot be expected to stop trading because of this. On the contrary, now China is at war, every effort should be made to help them keep the sea."

Peter felt John Toogood lean over his shoulder and blow a puff of evil smelling, but approving, smoke across that last sentence.

"The junk rules and regulations, as at present laid down, stipulate heavy minimum fines for infringements, such as—in the cases under review—failure to call at Sha-u-chung. It is, nevertheless, a fact that, because of the overriding need to avoid the Japanese destroyer lurking in T'uniang Pass, it is not always possible for Swabue-bound junkmasters to call at Sha-u-chung without undue risks to their junks and to themselves. It is submitted, therefore, that in the existing circumstances the only possible *modus operandi* is for the Commissioner, or his Deputy, to treat each case on its merits. Any other course will bring the junk trade to a standstill and junkmasters to ruin.

"In the light of the foregoing, I have the honour to request that the decisions taken by my Deputy at Swabue, and subsequently confirmed by me as shown on the seizure reports, copies enclosed, be approved *in toto*.

"I have the honour to be,
etc., etc., etc.

Peter rang for Miss Lee. While he waited, he re-read what he had written. It was short, but it was all he had to say.

He glanced at the clock above her head as she came in.

"Goodness, Miss Lee, it's after six. We'll have to hurry if you're to be in time for the seven o'clock show."

"That's quite all right, Mr. Yule." She opened her notebook and sat down. She examined the point of her pencil and crossed her legs.

Peter dictated at top speed and she smiled as she raced to keep up with him. She was still smiling when she made a squiggle like a rat's tail at the end of her shorthand. The squiggle signified that Archy Gordon, when he signed the despatch, would have the honour to be the I.G.'s obedient servant.

"I'll have this and the enclosures ready in twenty minutes." She gathered up the seizure reports and tripped out.

For the next quarter of an hour Peter busied himself with odds and ends which had accumulated on his desk during the afternoon. He was waiting for her when she came back. She carried the despatch in one hand and a flimsy envelope in the other.

"What's in the envelope, Miss Lee?"

She held it out.

"Oh,—a telegram. For you?"

She shook her head.

"For the Commissioner. It's only just come."

He took it. 'Express' was stamped on the top left-hand corner in indelible ink. Inside the first word he saw was Shanghai.

Miss Lee looked over his shoulder.

"Oh, of course. How silly of me. It's in code." She paused. "I'm afraid the secretary has locked the code up and gone home. Can't it wait till morning?"

Peter was not listening. The telegram was from Shanghai and there were only five code groups. If it was a reply, it was ominously brief. Almost before he began to work on the first group, he had the message. It was a reply. The first group stood for: 'Your telegram number so and so.' The next group was a word beginning with 'en-' The third group he knew. It was 'junk rules and regulations.' The last group before the I.G.'s name was *in toto*. The word beginning with 'en-' was enforce. He had tried not to remember, but it was no good. It was enforce all right. He looked up at Miss Lee and back at the telegram, while the significance of the message sank in.

"It's all right." He leant back in his chair. "I don't need the code." He tossed the telegram onto his desk. "I can decode that without it."

They had not waited for his despatch. They were not interested in what he had to say. War or no war, they wanted the junk rules and regulations enforced *in toto*. His cheeks began to burn. The fools! He rubbed his hands over his face. He must not lose his temper.

"I do hope it's nothing bad, Mr. Yule?"

"Well, it's a bit unexpected, but there's nothing to be done about it. I suppose I'll have to show it to the Commissioner in the morning." He looked up. "You needn't wait any longer."

"Oh, but what about our despatch? You'll need that checking through."

"No, Miss Lee." He smiled faintly. "We won't need our despatch. The I.G. isn't interested."

"I am sorry." She was genuinely distressed. "Isn't there anything I can do?" She was sympathetic and she was pretty. Everyone had gone home.

"No, I'm afraid not." He was conscious of being alone with an attractive girl in a deserted office. Her lips were fuller and probably softer than a European's. It would be a new experience to kiss a Chinese girl. He shook his head. "There's nothing left for you to do." He watched her move away from his chair. "Don't worry. I'll find a way out. You trot along to the boy friend. You've kept him waiting long enough."

"Jimmy won't mind waiting a bit longer." She patted her back-hair to give her figure every chance. "You're sure there's nothing I can do . . .? Nothing at all you want me for?"

Peter shook his head again. It would not help matters to start kissing the Commissioner's stenotypist, because he was baffled and depressed and she was pretty and willing.

He heard her go out as he picked up the despatch to read it through again. It was a good despatch. He seemed to spend his life drafting good despatches no one ever read. With a pencil he drew virgin triangles of frustration in the margin. He filled in each triangle methodically, but it did not help. Any more than taking Rosemary on his knee would have helped. If help was to come from anywhere, it would have to come from himself.

He tore the despatch across, put the two halves together and tore them again. In the end the thickness of the paper baffled his fingers. He dropped the twisted fragments into the wastepaper-basket. Some of them fluttered wide. From the parquet floor his broken sentences jeered at him.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

PETER sat on the edge of the bed drinking his morning tea and listening to his bath run in. The problem raised by the I.G.'s telegram remained unsolved, but he no longer believed it insoluble. Though he was unaware of it, the embryo of a solution had quickened in his sleep.

He finished his tea and walked to the south window. A thousand feet below a dozen big junks sailed slowly seaward, fishing junks outbound from Aberdeen through East Lamma channel. As is the habit of fishing junks they sailed in pairs. The morning sun, climbing the high ground beyond Magazine Gap, stretched out long fingers and touched their sails with light. The telephone beside his bed rang. He left the window and picked up the receiver.

"Yule speaking." It was half-past seven by his bedside clock.

"Morning, Peter. Tribe here."

"Good-morning, sir." The Tribe at this hour! "Where're you speaking from?"

"Your office."

"My office!"

"I'm just off the boat. I dropped in on my way to The Grips."

Peter said nothing. Coming from the Macao boat The Tribe would reach the hotel first.

"Esther came back with me. We're having breakfast together when she's powdered her nose."

"I wondered when you'd be back."

"I expect you did. As a matter of fact I had a chat with Henri before I left Macao..."

"Yes?"

"But there's no need to talk about that now. I'm much more interested in the erstwhile contents of your wastepaper-basket."

"In what!"

The Tribe laughed.

"You don't mind, Peter, do you? The scattered fragments caught my eye, so I pieced them together." He paused. "With them, and the I.G.'s telegram—which luckily I can decode as I have my copy of the code with me—

I have the picture to date. In the circumstances an eminently satisfactory one."

"I'm glad you think so."

"Why not? Of course it was a good despatch, like your binoculars despatch—good, that is, on paper—but not what was wanted. I consider it eminently satisfactory that, this time, I don't have to point that out."

"No?"

The Tribe ignored the question.

"I'm pleased. This time you realise yourself that it would be impolitic to persist."

"Better to tremble and obey."

"That's it. Tremble and obey." The Tribe laughed at the old tag from imperial rescripts. "Everyone will be agreeably surprised."

"Everyone?"

"Everyone that matters. I expect old T.L.—who can't have liked your handling of the Swabue junk case at all—when he hears, will give you a jade crab like Esther's."

"A crab like . . . !"

"You know. The one she calls Sam."

"I know."

"Well, I won't keep you. See you in the office after breakfast." The telephone clicked.

Peter stood with bent head staring at his feet. The bath was turned off and Te came into the room.

"*Hsi tsao hao lo.*"

"*Hao.*" Peter shuffled towards the bathroom. He was certain of one thing. He would never again behave in such a way that T. L. Chuang would present him with a crab.

Peter ate his breakfast on the glassed-in verandah. Beyond the window, allamandas in pots lined the steps to the garden. Their yellow trumpets, fresh open to the morning sun, blew an elfin paeon faintly audible through the glass. After breakfast he went down the steps and walked the length of the hibiscus hedge, Babetty at his heels. From the end of the hedge he looked down on East Lamma channel. The junks were further to seaward, moving out on the ebb-tide. There was little wind. Babetty stood on her hind feet and put her paws on him. He scratched the side of her head.

"It's a fair bugger, bitchee! No one worries about these fishing junks. But if I give the traders half a chance, the big boys will have at me."

Babetty yawned. She dropped on all fours and went to

look for her ball under the hedge. Peter walked down the path to the garage, started his car and drove away. Babetty watched from the end of the hedge, an old tennis-ball in her mouth. When the car turned the corner by Magazine Gap, she let the ball drop. It rolled back under the hedge.

Driving down from The Peak, Peter struggled with his immediate problem. The Tribe would be waiting at Marina House and The Tribe would know what he wanted. With no alternative suggestion ready, Peter needed time. At the top of Garden road the railings round the Cricket club came into sight. He let the car run forward in second gear. As he reached the railings, he slipped into top and drove to Statue square. He parked close to the praya and walked to the ferry. He would visit the railway. He might think of something, or, if he saw old John Toogood, John might have something to suggest.

Waiting for the ferry to start, he remembered that Archy would expect to find a draft despatch on his desk. He half-rose from his seat. But what was the good? He had nothing to suggest.

Someone shut the gates. A sailor pulled up the gangway and the ferry moved off. A shrill bell mocked late-comers. Safe in their seats, the passengers looked down at those who were left behind, with an air of satisfaction and contempt.

In the railway station, Peter put his head round the door of the Customs office. Mr. Chan, the clerk in charge, leant on the counter talking to an applicant in black coolie clothes. Neither of them looked up. Peter strolled on to the godowns, where the examination staff were sitting about on upturned kegs, some of them reading *The South China Morning Post*. A tidewaiter stood up. Suddenly Peter wanted to get away from Customs people.

"Anyone seen the manager this morning?"

"Yes, sir." The tidewaiter answered. "Mr. Toogood went through to the dock siding only a minute or two ago."

"Thanks." Peter walked onto the platform above the siding. John Toogood was below him on the wharf, one foot against a bollard, talking to his traffic clerk. Beyond him, junk masts stood up into the morning air. The tide had ebbed and the junks themselves were out of sight below the wharf.

Peter picked his way across the railway lines.

"Morning, John."

"Good morning, Peter." Toogood turned to his traffic

clerk. "Ah Tak, find out from Mr. Chan will you, why these junks haven't cleared yet."

"Yes, sir."

"I wouldn't be surprised if it wasn't the Customs again." John glanced at Peter. "Barnacles on the wheels of progress."

"What's the matter now, John?" Peter walked to the edge of the wharf. "You called us that before."

"And I'll call you it again. Look at those three junks! Loaded and ready to sail and this is the second tide they've missed." John sat against his bollard.

Below him Peter saw three junks lying side by side. There was something familiar about them. A steam launch passed outside them on its way to Holt's wharf and they rolled untidily in its wake. The Customs number of the furthest vessel showed momentarily. It was π 0026.

"So we're barnacles on the wheels of progress are we? Can't you think of something better?"

"Maybe I could—if you'd behave better."

"Maybe I am behaving better." Peter looked from the junks across the harbour to the new Hongkong and Shanghai Bank building, a still-born skyscraper dumped in the middle of a respectable British colony. The pause lengthened. He glanced up at the clock tower above the railway station. It was twenty-five minutes to ten. He looked back at the junks.

"Know anything about these three?"

"Why not tell me what you know?"

"I know two of them are from Swabue."

Toogood snorted.

"So does every wharf rat from Gin Drinkers' Bay to Kaitak. In another minute you'll be telling me the middle one's from Pinghoi!" He left his bollard and came to the edge of the wharf. "They're carrying soft coal this trip. Last trip only one of them carried coal. But that was sometime ago." He glared at Peter. "Quite sometime ago."

Peter said nothing.

"They must have been a long time unloading at Swabue."

"Not exactly unloading."

"I thought not—you barnacle!"

"I'm not a barnacle, John. I can't be everywhere at once. I've done all I could for Hop Li and younger brother Hop Lo Hon and wife's first cousin Ho. In fact most people think I've done far too much for them. I'm damned if I see what more I can do."

"I thought it was something like that." Toogood moved away from the edge of the wharf. "Come and tell your uncle."

Peter sat down on the bollard and told John the story of the junks from the beginning.

"So you came over this morning to kill time till you could think of something?"

"That's about it."

John glanced at the junk masts.

"I wonder have the junkmasters got wind of the fact that something's up." He fished a cheroot from his waistcoat pocket.

"You mean they've put off sailing because they're afraid to go to Swabue till they find out who comes out on top?"

"I didn't mean quite that, Peter." John looked up from lighting his cheroot. "After all, why should they be afraid? Swabue is a Chinese port. They're Chinese . . ."

"I mean in case I have to detain them again."

"Good God, man, you can't do that." Toogood stared. "You've released them once. Surely that'll have to stand." He took his cheroot out of his mouth. "You know, Peter, sometimes you make me wonder which side you Customs people are on—China's or Japan's."

"You know quite well who's side I'm on."

"Yes, I suppose I do." John examined the end of his cheroot. "But, now you're on the right side, you must stay on it."

The traffic clerk came back.

"Mr. Toogood."

"Yes, Ah Tak?"

"One of the junkmen is in the Customs office now. He says he's afraid to sail on account of the Swabue Customs."

"Afraid to sail! God damn it all . . .!"

Peter interrupted.

"John, will you ask your clerk to go back to the office and tell Chan to tell Hop Li—it's sure to be him—to sail. Tell him that I personally guarantee that he will not be detained, either at Swabue or anywhere else."

The traffic clerk hesitated.

"You heard what the Deputy said, Ah Tak?"

"Yes, sir." The clerk touched his cap and went back the way he had come.

There was a pause.

"Peter, you can't just tell them to sail and hope for the best."

"I know I can't, John. But ever since this morning I've felt there was some way out of this difficulty, some quite simple solution if only I could see it. Now I've told Hop Li to sail, I've got to find it—just got to. It's as you said. They've been released. That'll have to stand."

They strolled down the wharf to the gate that leads to the ferry.

"Whatever you do, Peter, don't fail them."

"I won't."

"And remember, it's China. If you can, do things the Chinese way."

"The Chinese way? Yes, I expect you're right." Peter looked across the harbour. "Even in that half-grown skyscraper, the shroffs use an abacus when they balance the ledgers. I'll remember, though I doubt if I'd get very far if I followed the old style and trembled and obeyed."

"No?" Toogood puffed at this cheroot. "I wonder. Sometimes I think the difference between the oriental and the occidental, is that the occidental tell's you he'll do things his way and be damned to you; the oriental agrees, kowtows, goes away and does as he intended to do in the first place. The one increases whatever opposition there is already, the other minimises it, or, if he's very clever, uses it to destroy itself, as the Emperor used the pirates."

"What Emperor and what pirates?"

"You know the old story."

"No I don't."

"Of course you do. About the pirates who became so powerful that the Emperor of China condescended to issue an edict against them."

"Go on. Tell me."

"The edict ended as usual with 'tremble and obey.' But pirates can't read, so, instead of doing either, they took the Emperor's emissaries and suspended them by their pigtailed from the mast-head—and the fleets he sent against them, they sank."

"And what did the Emperor do?"

"The Emperor was a scholar, so he resorted to cunning. He promulgated a further edict, this time addressed to his loyal and literate subjects who lived on the coast, commanding them to move lock, stock and barrel twenty *li* inland."

"I see. And being loyal and literate, they obeyed."

"Exactly. And in no time at all the coast of China was such a desert as made child's play of the pirates' worst forays."

"I remember now. And the pirates, finding no one to ravage, as men of blood and little sense will, fell on each other; and those who did not perish by the sword, or in slower and more painful ways, died miserably of starvation."

"And the people returned to their homes and lived in peace. Since when no *hai tao* has dared provoke a man of letters to extremes."

Peter chuckled.

"The Emperor's version of a desert was a bit more than the pirates bargained for."

Toogood blew a puff of smoke into the still air of mid-morning.

"John!" Peter's eyes were bright with excitement. "I begin to see light. The Inspectorate are yammering for rules and regulations. Suppose I give them rules and regulations without measure and without stint."

"It's the right method." Toogood nodded. "You might try."

Peter was first off the ferry. He took a short cut down an alley. An old woman, leaning on a bamboo stick, put out a hand like a claw and he dropped a coin into it. She blessed him and his mother and father in a high cracked voice. As a rule she had a poor opinion of the mothers and fathers—if any—of the foreigners who passed by.

In his office Peter found a detailed map of the South China coast. He spread it on the map-table by his window. He studied it and every now and then he underlined a name on the coast between Pakhoi and Amoy. Once or twice he glanced at the door, but no one had seen him come in and he was not disturbed. He underlined a name some miles north of Amoy and stood back from the table. He pressed a bell at the side of his desk.

A few minutes later Rosemary Lee knocked and came in.

"I didn't know you were here, Mr. Yule. The Commissioner and Mr. Tribe have been looking for you."

"Oh! Do you know where they are now?"

"I guess maybe they've gone round to The Grips for coffee."

"All right. Sit down."

She sat down and crossed her legs.

"I expect the Commissioner was looking for the despatch I promised him. I'm ready to dictate it now."

"Is it a reply to that telegram we got last night?"

Peter nodded.

"The Inspectorate seem to know what they want, so I propose to give it to them."

"Oh!" Miss Lee waited, her notebook on her knee. For herself, she liked a man who took what he wanted.

Peter dictated steadily, walking between his desk and the table, and glancing now and again at the map.

"... it is clear, therefore, that the Inspectorate wants the junk rules and regulations enforced *in toto*. To arrange for this, as, unfortunately, the Japanese have occupied or invested all the old junk control stations, new stations will have to be sited and built. Since this concerns the whole South China coast, it is thought better to submit a comprehensive scheme forthwith. Thereafter, the treaty ports concerned, to each of which a copy of this despatch will be sent, can, if they so desire, comment on the suggested sites in the light of their special knowledge of local conditions."

Peter paused. There would be no lack of comments. There was more than one young Customs assistant vegetating in an outport, who would fall over himself for a chance to put Mister Acting Temporary Deputy Commissioner Yule in his place.

"A list of suggested sites for stations between Pakhoi and Amoy is, therefore, appended. In this list the stations appear under the port best situated to undertake the work of construction and subsequent administration. Once these stations are in operation, there should be no difficulty in enforcing the junk rules and regulations to the letter."

Peter smiled at Miss Lee. She smiled in return, though this was not the sort of reply she had expected.

"Now for the list of names." Peter leaned over the map.

Geographically the sites he chose were ideal. Each had a good anchorage close to a junk route, or as close as it was possible to get while the Japanese blockade continued. Nevertheless he had difficulty suppressing the undercurrent of amusement in his voice.

No one of the sites but was infested with pirates, afflicted with anopheles mosquitoes or exposed to typhoons. Some of them were subject to outbreaks of bubonic plague, cholera or typhus; most of them could boast of smugglers or robbers or both—not the peaceful smugglers of the Hongkong frontier, but snake-boat men, salt smugglers and hi-jackers, who would resort to violence on any pretext or on no pretext at all. If a site was free from such pests, it was without roads, without water, or without a market town nearer than a day's

march. If a station could be built on any of the sites, it could not be maintained. On most of them it could not be built.

When he came to the Kowloon district, Peter surveyed the names he had underlined. Here was a chance to poke fun at Henri Bardac. Henri would tie himself into knots trying to stay on the right side of everybody.

"It is plain that, so long as Japanese destroyers patrol the waters round Hongkong, the Kowloon Customs cannot re-occupy either Lintin or Taishan, the island stations guarding the Canton River delta, nor Samun on the junk route to Swabue. Alternative sites must, therefore, be chosen.

"To take the place of Lintin, a station should be sited on Keiao. Fortunately all the junks previously controlled from Lintin pass this island. It is larger and closer to the mainland than Lintin, and the waters round it, although deep enough for junks, are too shallow for a destroyer. As Keiao is near Macao, the Customs there should construct and administer the new station."

No need for Peter to mention that for years Keiao had been overrun by smugglers who lived by preying on lesser smugglers, or that they, and Francolin partridge and a few woodcock, were the island's sole inhabitants. The Customs staff might subsist on the birds they shot, if the smugglers did not shoot first. In his comments, no doubt, Henri would be constrained to stress the latter contingency.

"Taishan will be replaced by a mainland station at Shekwan. It can be maintained and victualled from the present Kowloon station at Shehow."

There was no road across the hills from Shehow and the type of sandfly that lived at Shekwan was so minute it thought a mosquito net a man-made device for keeping its victims in one place while sandflies fed at leisure. Certainly it was something exceptional in sandflies, since it had driven away the lepers who once infested the place.

"Samun can be replaced by Pinghoi. Pinghoi is on the route to Swabue and its harbour is a favourite with junkmen."

'For junkmen' thought Peter 'read pirates.'

Pinghoi had been a favourite with Bias Bay pirates from the year dot, probably since the time of the Emperor in the story. It had been pirates from Pinghoi who had overpowered the officers of the *S. S. Tungchow* off the Shantung Promontory, disguised her superstructure, and sailed her down the coast under the noses of the British and American gunboats, searching for her. At Pinghoi, to the chagrin of her owners and

the delight of the American school children who formed the bulk of her passengers, they looted her.

Peter remembered Frost. If the Chief Tidesurveyor saw this despatch before it was explained to him, he would pinch a hole through his cheek. There would, of course, be plenty of apoplexy in the outports, but that was the Inspectorate's affair. The more apoplexy, the better.

"Is that all, Mr. Yule?" Rosemary was disappointed. She had been careful to cross her legs so that they took advantage of the split in her long gown, but Mr. Yule had not once glanced at them.

"Oh, I'm sorry . . .!" Peter had all but forgotten her. "I'd forgotten the sites for Swatow and Amoy. Then I'm finished." He dictated the names. "Now, Miss Lee, please type out a draft, and, as soon as the Commissioner gets back, take it in to him. . ."

"But Mr. Yule . . .?"

"It'll be all right. He'll understand the delay after last night's telegram."

"But, sir, won't you take it in to him yourself in case something wants explaining?"

Peter smiled.

"No, Miss Lee. This despatch explains itself."

He did not trust himself to explain it. Besides, Archy would sign. No one would see through it who had not an intimate knowledge of the coast. Even if The Tribe knew about Keiao, Shekwan or Pinghoi, what could he do but comment against them? So long as Japanese destroyers patrolled the coast, alternative sites did not exist.

Miss Lee left the office, her notebook under her arm, her back view unremarked.

Of course, if someone at the Inspectorate realised that the despatch was a trick, the I.G. would not be pleased. Still, if it worked, what did it matter? What had he to lose? He picked up a pencil and scribbled on his blotter. A little trouble over a despatch would not hurt. It would not be the first time—not by a long chalk. His pencil wrote 'Primrose', and he stopped ruminating to stare at what he had written. But surely no one would be cad enough to make more trouble over her than there was already.

He worked for an hour. Then he went to tiffin. Back in the office, he leant over the map and looked at the names he had underlined. They gave him a bird's-eye view of his scheme. As The Tribe had said of the other two, this despatch

would look good on paper. Luckily there were half a dozen young assistants in the outports who would leave the Inspectorate in no doubt about what it was like in fact.

Peter was so engrossed that he did not hear Frost's knock.

"Can I have a word with you, Yule?" Frost stood in the doorway, fingering his cheek.

"Of course, Frost. Come in. As a matter of fact I was just coming to see you about . . ."

"I've seen it already. As a matter of fact I was in the Commissioner's office this morning, when Miss Lee brought in your draft though I didn't get a chance to read it myself till five minutes ago."

"Five minutes ago . . .?"

"Yes. The Commissioner's *t'ingch'ai* just brought the office copy in for me to see."

"The office copy? Then he's signed it already. That's quick."

"He stayed late in the office to sign it, and, before he went for tiffin, he left instructions that it's to go out with the afternoon post without fail. He's even telegraphed the I.G. to say it's coming."

"That's very satisfactory."

"It's nothing of the sort." The mark on Frost's cheek was an angry red.

"Why, Frost, what's the matter?"

"You know perfectly well what's the matter. None of my staff can live at Shekwan. There's no well. The old one was contaminated by the lepers and, anyway, they'd all go down with sandfly fever."

"What about Pinghoi?"

"You might as well have chosen Fan Lo Kong."

"Oh no. The water at Fan Lo Kong is too shallow for junks."

"Bah!" Frost walked to the window, his fingers busy with his cheek. "What's the idea, Yule? You know as well as I do that Pinghoi is out of the question."

"Because of the *Tungchow*?"

"Not only her. What about the Russians who sailed down the coast from Dairen in a ship's boat. They got away with it till they put in to Pinghoi for one night. You remember. You were at Samun the morning they got there. In that one night they'd been pirated three times, and the last time the pirates stole the floor boards . . ."

"And nearly slit a Russian throat or two because there was nothing else to steal." Peter smiled. "I remember."

"I don't see what's so funny about it." Frost strode to the door. "Everything I've said is true, and damn well you know it." Frost seldom swore. He pushed the door open.

"Here, Frost, wait a minute! I didn't mean to upset you. I'm not as stupid as you think."

"I don't think you're stupid. If you were, there might be some excuse." He fumbled with his cheek. "And the thing looks so well on paper. It'll deceive anyone who doesn't know the coast inside out—but you do." He shook his head. "I don't understand you. Where's the need for all these details? Let the Commissioners choose their own sites."

"But there aren't any to choose."

"Then why choose impossible ones? I never saw such a list. If you'd done it on purpose . . ."

"Frost," Peter sat against his desk. "listen to me for a moment. You saw last night's telegram from the I.G., didn't you?"

"Yes I did, but . . ."

"You know as well as I do we can't enforce the junk rules and regulations as they stand."

"Maybe not—but we can try."

"We are trying. We're doing the best we can with what's left—only the I.G. won't see it."

Frost said nothing. He agreed, but he would not say so. He was a Chief Tidesurveyor. Questions of policy were for the Commissioners and the I.G. Whatever he thought, he would not step outside his sphere.

"The I.G. won't listen to Kowloon, but he'll damn well have to listen to a unanimous howl from the outports." Peter could not help smiling. "Judging from your remarks, they'll howl all right."

"I see." Frost nodded reluctantly. "I see now what you're after." His hand dropped from his cheek. "It'll work, too. There isn't a Chief Tidesurveyor in the Service who would put up a station at any one of the sites you've chosen. They won't be slow to say so, and they won't be any politer than I was."

"The ruder the better. It isn't me they're insulting."

"It's sharp practice, Yule. The Commissioner signed the despatch, but he didn't understand it."

"He didn't ask."

"You didn't give him a chance. You sent Miss Lee in with the draft on purpose instead of taking it in yourself."

"You're getting too sharp for me." Peter laughed. He did not mind Frost knowing. In the coming struggle Frost's place was on the fence.

"But you've forgotten one thing, Yule. What about Mr. Tribe?"

"The Tribe has nothing to do with Kowloon despatches. He told me so himself." Peter glanced at the map. "Besides, he doesn't know the South Coast the way you do."

"He knows it well enough to smell a rat."

"Let him. What can he . . . ?"

There was a rap at the door. The Tribe put his head in.

"Oh, good afternoon, Mr. Frost."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Tribe."

"I hope I'm not intruding." The Tribe came all the way into the room.

"Not at all, sir. I've just finished." Frost caught the door as it swung to. He nodded to Peter and went out.

The Tribe crossed to the window.

"Glad to find you in at last, Peter. I waited for you half the morning." He dropped his hat on the map-table and looked down at the street. "I heard about your despatch from Archy at tiffin. Now I've read it." He paused. "The opening sentences seem harmless enough, though I have no experience of you in such an obedient mood." He turned and sat down on the window ledge. "Somehow you seem to me to have overdone the tremble and obey." The sharp eyes examined Peter with interest. "And the subsequent details! Very useful and enlightening, I'm sure, if you know the South Coast. But I don't—not that well—and I don't understand them. Especially I don't understand the details." His eyes were bird-like and predatory. "Explain them to me, Peter."

"There's nothing to explain."

"No?" The Tribe's eyebrows arched. "Peter, you make me nervous. At Kwanti last January there was nothing to explain about your riding in the first race. Don't tell me it's another nothing like that. These nothings of yours cost money."

"What do you want me to explain?"

"The details. I fancied I'd made that clear." The Tribe crossed his ankles. "I find stupidity in you no more convincing than obedience." He waited. "Well, take one detail: why Pinghoi?"

"Why not?"

"Wasn't the *Tungchow*, with all those American school children on board, taken there by pirates in '35 or '36?"

"In '35."

"I thought as much." The tips of the long fingers beat a puzzled tattoo below the window ledge. "Peter, I'm shy of these details. In fact the whole despatch makes me shy."

"I'm sorry"

"Then I suggest you re-draft it."

"I can't. It's too late. The Commissioner has signed it."

"I know, I know. I heard all about that at tiffin." The Tribe pulled his long nose. "I should have smelt a rat with Archy so enthusiastic about a despatch of yours. Now he's gone off to visit the frontier with his golf bag in the back of his car. You didn't arrange that, did you, Peter?" He stood up and walked to the map-table. "No, I suppose not. That's just Archy. Golf in office hours and work when his staff has gone home. A form of escape I suppose." The Tribe examined the map as he talked. "Nevertheless, Peter, I suggest you re-draft the despatch, or at least delay its departure until tomorrow when we can talk it over together—you and I and the Commissioner." The Tribe looked up. "And, perhaps, Mr. Frost. Yes, on second thoughts, Peter, I'd like to hear Frost on your despatch. He went out very suddenly."

"I'm afraid I can't do anything about it."

"No?" The Tribe patted his bald patch.

"No. The Commissioner left definite instructions for it to go out by this afternoon's post. He's even wired the I.G. to say it's coming."

The Tribe sighed.

"When I said your all too brief sojourn in Wuchow had done you good, I was wrong. It hasn't. That's unfortunate—unless, of course, you like trouble."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, if you don't do things for me, you can't expect me to do things for you. That is if there should be any trouble."

"Trouble? Trouble over what?"

"Over anything." The Tribe moved his hat so that he could see the Swatow and Amoy districts. "Over this despatch, if you like."

"Why should there be?"

"No reason. I just have a feeling that if I knew more about these details—about which, Peter, you are so singularly reticent—" The bright eyes were lifted momentarily from the map. "I'd like it even less. Other people, who know more, may feel the same way. If that should happen . . ." He turned from the map and waited, his back against the table.

"They—you—anybody can comment against it."

"Comment against it?" The Tribe shrugged his shoulders. "Why? If Pinghoi is a fair sample of the sites you have chosen, you'll get all the adverse comments you want." He reached across the table for his hat. The lines under the place names caught his eye. "All the adverse comments you want . . ." His voice trailed away. He hung over the map. "I remember now—shooting on Keiao—I had to have an armed escort." He turned and stared, and as he stared, he put on his hat. "No, Peter, you'll get no adverse comments from me—not now.—" He walked to the door. "Not now I understand the details." He nodded. "It's very pretty. It springs from the type of low cunning I admire, and could have used. It seems a pity to waste it on a moribund junk trade." He pushed the door open. "If you come to your senses during the next half hour, I shall be having tea at The Grips with Esther." He paused. "Perhaps, Peter, I should have mentioned earlier that I was having tea with Mrs. van Loon?" He waited. "No?" His eyebrows arched. "Well, you must make up your own mind. Only don't leave it too late." The door swung to, behind him.

For the next half hour, Peter sat staring at his blotter, and, as if its white surface was a crystal, he followed The Tribe along Queen's road to The Grips.

Esther would be on the first floor lounge, her arms spread, her fingers bent over the sofa's edge. She would move one arm and the jade crab would swing from her wrist.

The Tribe would drop his hat beside her.

"Ordered tea?"

"Five minutes ago."

"For two?"

"Of course." Esther would look up. "Why? Is someone else coming?"

"Peter—if he'll see reason." The Tribe would sit down. "He's determined to get his own way over the junk trade, and he's drafted a clever despatch to that end." The Tribe's fingers would go to the top of his head. "Archy signed it without understanding a word of it." He would loosen his

trousers about his bony knees. "If it's sent, he'll get his way."

"If?"

"I'm still hoping he'll see reason."

"He won't. He's like you—too clever to see reason. Anyway, what about Archy? Won't he stop it?"

"I tell you he's signed it already—without understanding a word of it."

"You can comment against it."

"Oddly enough that's just what Peter wants me—and everyone else—to do." The Tribe would examine his carefully manicured nails. "No, Archy is no good and comments are no good." He would look up from his hands. "Besides, Esther dear, I have other plans."

"What other plans?" Esther would sit round, her eyes cold and green. "I didn't like that 'dear,' I didn't like it at all."

The Boy would bring tea and The Tribe would pour out. Esther would make no effort to help.

"Tea, Esther?"

"What other plans?"

"I'll explain. Milk?"

"If you don't know by this time that I take milk, it's high time you did. I'm waiting."

The Tribe would help himself.

"Peter's getting in my hair—what's left of it. I'm sorry now that I agreed to the I.G.'s suggestion to give him a trial as Deputy. That was a mistake. But I'm not going to fight him over this despatch. I mightn't win. Instead, I'm going to lie low and give him rope—lots of rope. He's a great user of rope is our Peter."

"And in the meantime?"

"In the meantime?" The Tribe would pat the top of his head. "In the meantime I'm going to ruin him socially."

Esther would put down her cup.

"And this, I suppose, is where I come in."

"Naturally. Why sound so suspicious?"

"Sound suspicious?" Esther would laugh grimly. "I didn't mean to sound suspicious. I am suspicious. Anytime, during the last ten years, I've forgotten to be suspicious, I've been sorry."

"All right. I'll put my cards on the table."

"I'd be fascinated to see you try." She would stir her tea. "But you can't, Tony. You don't play cards. You play

chess and in chess the men are on the table already. That's the way it's played. It looks above-board, but it's not—not the way you play it."

The Tribe would help himself to an eclair.

"Jo's going to divorce you, isn't he?"

"So what?"

"And he's going to name Peter co-respondent, isn't he?"

"Go on. You know the answers as well as I do."

"Do I have to? Isn't that enough? All you have to do is write to Jo. Tell him you're still in love with Peter and that you hope, once the divorce is through, he'll do the decent thing and marry you."

"Don't be a fool. Jo wouldn't believe it. I wouldn't believe it myself."

"What of it? Jo's lawyers will, and they'll produce a letter like that in court. Doubtless it will make less embarrassing reading than Peter's chits, and, whether you believe it or not, the rest of China will—they'll want to. And Peter'll have to marry you." The Tribe would sip his tea. "Besides, when Primrose hears, she won't touch Peter with a barge pole. You'll catch him on the rebound."

"You make me sound a bargain."

"Have a cake?" The Tribe would help himself to another eclair. "Why shouldn't I say what I think? You'll make a hell of a wife; but that's none of my business. I'm not marrying you."

Esther would help herself to more tea.

"I want a husband. That's true enough. But I don't believe your scheme will work. I don't see Primrose giving Peter up, no matter what comes out in court, and even if she does, I don't see him marrying me. And, finally, I'm not sure I want him at any price."

"Esther dear, you're going to be divorced whether you like it or not. You want a husband. Peter may not be exactly what you want, but he's the only one in sight."

"And if Primrose won't give him up?"

"She'll have to. I'll see Sir Christopher. He's a C-G. With the scandal there'll be, he'll have to put his foot down whether he likes it or not."

Esther would stare at him, and under her scrutiny he would grow uncomfortable.

"You are a four-letter man, Tony, aren't you. I'm damned if I know what I see in you. Maybe I still have hopes of marrying you."

The Tribe would lick the cream off his fingers, the eyes on either side of his big nose cold and exasperated.

"Esther dear, I'm not marrying you. Peter is. Jo has the goods on him."

"And what about me?"

"You're getting what you want, a husband and a good-looking, vigorous one at that, and my scheme will work."

"It had better." Esther would put down her cup and her green eyes would meet The Tribe's bright bird-like stare. "That's all. It had better."

It would be The Tribe who would look away.

Peter sighed and pushed back his chair. He went to the table and slid the map into its drawer. As he closed the drawer, his eye ran down the coast from Amoy to Pakhoi. Frost's reactions, and still more The Tribe's, had convinced him that his plan would work. But he no longer took any pleasure in it. The more certain success, the more certain it was that The Tribe would go to any lengths to discredit him. With Esther on his side, The Tribe would not find it difficult.

The drawer shut, Peter turned to stare out of the window. He knew enough about The Tribe to know he could scarcely hope to keep Primrose and win his junk war. Well, he could not desert the junks now, even if he wished. Primrose herself would not want that. He had made up his mind to fight and enjoy fighting. The joy had gone, but he could still fight. That was what Primrose would want and that was what he meant to do.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

LATE in the forenoon of the last Saturday in May, Peter sat in his office looking through the flood of outport comment on his junk despatch. The despatch itself lay buried underneath.

'Unnecessary'; 'quite impracticable'; 'ill-timed and ill-considered'; 'these preposterous proposals'; words here and there caught his eye. Everyone had something to say. In every case it was something rude. Two of the smaller ports suggested that someone should tell Kowloon there was a war on. Customs opinion was unanimous. Kowloon's proposals for the enforcement of the junk rules and regulations *au pied de la lettre* were bosh.

Peter wanted to laugh. He had been clever. His snowball had turned into an avalanche which would overwhelm the Inspectorate. His laughter rose mirthlessly to the surface. In the path of this avalanche lay his hopes of Primrose.

And that was not all. In face of the steady increase in junk traffic, he had stopped visiting the railway. The last time John Toogood had slapped him on the back.

"I don't know what you've done, Peter, old man, but your pal Hop Li tells my traffic clerk that even Swabue clears them reasonably quickly now." John blamed Peter's sickly grin on an unusually savoury cheroot.

And next week Primrose would be in Hongkong for the ball at Government House—so would Jo van Loon.

To take his mind off his troubles, Peter turned to the dossier. He checked the list of ports to which copies of the despatch had been sent with the comments. All the comments had come, except Macao's, but even they must come soon. Macao was on the other side of the delta, and, however much he disliked it, Henri must comment. Peter had seen to that.

Rosemary Lee knocked and came in. She had three letters in her hand, a buff envelope with *On Service* across the top; and two others, one big and blue, the other small and white.

"The Commissioner's secretary says you have the dossier of the junk despatch, sir."

"That's right. I'm encouraging myself by reading what the outports have to say."

Rosemary smiled doubtfully. She did not understand the Deputy's recent enthusiasm for adverse comment. She held out the buff envelope.

"Macao's comments, sir."

"Thanks. I was just wondering about them. Adverse, I suppose."

"I'm afraid so."

"Why be afraid? Why not enjoy them as I do?"

Miss Lee did not smile. She was tired of a joke she did not understand. She put the small white envelope on the desk by his elbow.

"This note came with the comments."

"Thanks." Peter recognized Henri's thick pointed writing.

The other envelope she propped against his calendar. She knew who had written it and she liked Mr. Yule to know she

knew. She had a proper respect for love and only a passing interest in anything else.

"Is that everything?"

"Yes, sir." She hesitated. She wanted to see him reach first for the blue envelope.

Peter would have given her that satisfaction, but a growing feeling of anxiety made him prefer to open Primrose's letter when he was alone.

"It's late, Miss Lee. I shan't need you again. Better run off to your tiffin if you have nothing more to do."

"Yes, sir." She glanced once more at the big envelope before she went.

As the door swung to, Peter picked it up. The first words: 'Peter, darling' reassured him. No rumour of the impending divorce had reached her.

"Christopher and I are coming down next Friday on the morning express. Meet us if you can. It's such a long time since I've seen you.

"I've been hearing all sorts of conflicting rumours about the junks. The shipping people here say there has been a big increase in junk traffic, but your friends in the Customs say you've gone mad. Dear Peter, if you have, I must marry you at once!

"We'll be staying with Bonzo. It's nearer you; and Government House will be in a whirl. Do get Friday afternoon off so that we can go to Big Wave alone."

'Alone' was underlined.

Peter stared out of the window. It was a miracle that she had heard nothing. He had been a cad and a fool. Marriage! If she heard the truth from someone else, she would never speak to him again. He must get next Friday afternoon off and take her to Big Wave. There, or on the way back to Bonzo's, he would tell her everything. Bonzo was the A.P.C. No. 1 and lived just round the corner from No. 509.

He read the rest of the letter. The big spidery writing was like her, clear and outspoken. He could have read it half-way across the room. Not like his cramped scrawl. Some people could not read it at all, and were at pains to say so.

He took Macao's comments out of their envelope and glanced through them. They were adverse, but mild compared with some.

"The suggested site at Keiao will be difficult to supply."

No mention of the fact that any Customs staff sent there, might have difficulty surviving.

"On the other hand, Shekki, the destination of the majority of junks which pass Keiao, can continue to control them as it does at present, and, as we have reason to believe, Swabue continues to control north-bound junks which were previously controlled from Samun. In any event, no change is desirable till the political situation clears.

Henri called it a political situation as the Japanese called it The China Incident, hoping thereby to make it less a war.

As Peter opened the dossier to add Macao's comments to it, he noticed the small envelope Miss Lee had put by his elbow. Probably Henri wanted a bed for the night of the ball. He opened it and read the first few lines. It was not about the ball.

"Dear Yule,"

"Dear Yule!" What was the matter with the sod.

"I have forwarded my comments on your despatch under separate cover. I need not expatiate on them, nor on it.

"Expatiate!" Peter's eyebrows drew into a frown. Henri had been consulting that little red dictionary of his. He was about to be formal and French.

"With your eyes open you have embarked on a course which can only lead to an open rupture with Mr. Tribe.

"The Tribe, Henri." Peter murmured. "The Tribe."

"A conflict between you will place me in a very embarrassing position.

Peter did not have to be told why Henri found it embarrassing.

"Nor is this the only, nor even the most embarrassing, position in which you have placed me. Cast your mind back to the night of the Bachelors' ball."

Peter read on quickly.

"During it, you had occasion to ask me to look after Primrose, in case you were late for her dance after supper.

"You were late—very. However, I suspected nothing until I returned to the mess. When I switched on the light, you were in bed asleep, but on the hearth rug—a white goat skin if you remember"

Peter remembered Esther's brown firelit body against its rough white hairs.

"I noticed and picked up three or four lengths of dried grass. They were from an Hawaiian skirt. You had

"made me an accessory before and after the fact, without my knowledge and without my consent.

Peter wondered if even a Frenchman expected his friends to tell him their amorous intentions in advance.

"I threw them into the fire, but that will not prevent Mr. van Loon calling me as a witness when he names you co-respondent in his divorce next week.

Peter's face burned. He glanced at the calendar and bit his lip. Next Friday was still a week away. If Primrose heard in the meantime, if someone else told her, especially with such details.....!

"In the circumstances in which you have placed me, I have no alternative but to apply for an immediate transfer to Mengtze. I have reason to believe my request will be favourably considered. In Mengtze I shall be among French people whose customs and manners I understand.

Your sincere friend,
Henri Bardac.

"Sincere Friend! Whose customs and manners I understand!" Peter grinned feebly. "He sounds as if he'd like to cut my throat."

Henri, of course, was right. The tell-tale grass was from Esther's skirt. She had stood on the rug, one bare foot on her skirt, the other held out to the fire, wiggling her toes, while red shadows chased each other across her firm body.

Peter sat up. Thinking salacious thoughts about Esther and the past, would not help with the future and Primrose. Henri might not be a rat, but he knew a sinking ship when he saw one, and acted accordingly. He could not be blamed. He had been badly treated. But other people, people who would not want to desert, might have to. Primrose...?

Peter turned the pages of the dossier. This was the thing he had foreseen, but that did not lessen the shock. The adverse comments, which half an hour ago had faintly amused, now sickened him. He got up, went to the window and stared down at the street.

Henri's note was a straw in the wind. What Henri wrote today, the rest of the China coast would hear tomorrow and gossip over the day after. He turned from the window. What he could see of Primrose's letter was loving and trusting.

"Jesus!" He sat down and put his head in his hands. "What am I to do?"

Even when he told her, what then? He thought of writing, only to dismiss the idea. He had behaved like a coward long enough. He could only hope she would hear nothing before Friday. At least, if he told her himself, it would be easier for her.

Someone knocked.

Peter lifted his head.

"Come in."

The door opened and Commander Mordent, the Southern Commander, came in. Mordent might have been a Breton, or an Irishman from Galway with Armada blood in his veins, or a Cornishman. He was Cornish and ships were his religion.

He had been a merchant seaman, and the hard school in which he had risen showed in his thin determined lips. He sat down at Peter's desk, picked up a pair of dividers and parted them between his fingers. His face was tired. The lines from his nose to the corners of his mouth made an apron of his upper lip. He looked what he was, a man who had lost faith in his stomach.

Peter glanced at the clock over the door. Mordent's stomach ulcers needed light meals at regular intervals.

"It's pretty late for you to be in the office, Mordent. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes, Yule, there is. I hear from Frost that you're winning this junk war of yours with the Inspectorate."

Peter nodded.

"Frost seems to think your methods are a bit peculiar, but that's no concern of mine." Mordent looked at Peter. "You are winning, aren't you?"

"Oh yes, I'm winning. I don't see how I can lose—I wish I did."

Mordent had no desire to inquire into the peculiar ways of Preventive Deputies. His business was with ships.

"And if you win, the junks will keep the sea?"

"That's right."

"What about my ships? If the junks keep the sea, so must they." A belch rose in Mordent's throat, and the after-taste turned his voice sour. "All of them, except the *Hoilung*, are rotting in Kowloon Bay, weed a foot deep on their bottoms. My officers hang round Bessie's bar, and the men round sly brothels . . ."

"You can't blame them." Peter smiled. "There are no others, since the Governor's lady shut all legal competition to her dull parties."

Mordent did not listen.

"I want my ships at sea. Because she's working in Mirs Bay, the *Hoilung* is the only efficient ship I've got."

"A little over-keen perhaps." Peter remembered his trip through T'uniang Pass.

"It is a good fault" Mordent would not be side tracked. "If you can fix things for the junks, fix them for my ships. I don't care what methods you use."

Peter might have been annoyed, but he liked and respected Mordent, and he was too worried about his own problems to take over-much notice.

"Junks and cruisers are not quite the same thing, Mordent, but I agree, the ships would be better at sea, better for them and better for the junks. We must keep what control we can, and, when it comes to arguing with the Inspectorate, even the appearance of control is better than no control at all."

"Then you'll help."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want my ships at sea."

"Yes, I know, Mordent, but where at sea? There aren't many places outside British waters where the Japs will tolerate a Chinese Customs cruiser."

"They tolerate one in Mirs Bay."

"British water. . . ."

"British waters, my foot! Half the coastline is Chinese."

"I know, but. . . ."

"If they tolerate one working east of Pengchao, in the part of the bay entirely surrounded by Chinese territory, why not in Bias Bay?"

"Bias Bay? Mordent, you must be mad! How would she get there, and, once she was there, how would you victual her? You daren't bring her back and forth. The Jap destroyer off Samun. . . ."

"I know, Yule, I know. I haven't come running in here with a lot of half-baked suggestions. Though you may not think it, I have given this matter considerable thought."

"I'm sure you have." Peter had kept his temper so far. He did not intend to lose it now. "Fire ahead. I'm listening."

"My plan is to slip a cruiser through T'uniang Pass when the Jap isn't looking. I'd leave her in Bias Bay as long as possible, victualling her from Autow. I suppose there would be no difficulty in sending stores to Autow by road?"

"No, no difficulty. I expect Frost would let you use the

patrol wagon. He could combine the run with a normal road patrol."

"And the officers and men could come in the same way for leave, or when they had to." Mordent paused. "The ship would only work beyond the entrance to the bay at night. Even so, she could cover Pinghoi and keep an eye on northbound junks for you."

"Yes, she could." Peter nodded. "The *Hoilung* does well enough in Mirs Bay, but she can't cover T'uniang Pass, and when she tries to, she's inclined to overdo it." Peter paused, but Mordent would not comment. Junk control was the Deputy's affair; his was to get his ships to sea. "And junks bound for Pinghoi or Swabue she simply doesn't see, unless they make the call at Sha-u-chung, and I'm against that call as you know."

"Then you'll support me?"

"Now wait a minute, Mordent. It's true that the Japs have so far respected our claim to the whole of Mirs Bay as British, but, as you said yourself, the claim's ridiculous. If we start pushing ships . . ."

"One ship."

"All right. One ship, even a small one, into Bias Bay, the minute the skipper of the Jap destroyer sees what we're about, he'll start consulting his maps, and, even if they are Admiralty charts, which they probably will be, he'll see quick enough how preposterous our claim is."

"In the first place, he won't see what we're about."

"I know, Mordent, I know. But if he does, and if, as a result, we lose a ship?"

Mordent stuck the sharp points of the dividers into the blotting pad and walked them stiff-legged back and forth. They pock-marked the paper with a pattern of minute holes. He knew that Old Andy, who loved every ship in the Customs fleet as if he had designed it himself, would break the man responsible for the loss of any one of them. If two men were responsible, he would break them both. Mordent drove the points in deep. He knew the risk, but he could not see his ships rot.

Peter watched the dividers. They were at home between Mordent's fingers, as a sextant would be, or a marline spike. If Mordent's plan succeeded, ships and junks would benefit. But if it ended in disaster . . .?

"Old Andy'd break us, Mordent. You know he would." Peter remembered Henri's note and The Tribe's veiled threats.

So far they only menaced his private life. Even so, they might not leave much for Old Andy. He sighed inwardly. "Have you got as far as thinking what ship?"

"I thought the *Ch'ap'ing*. . ."

"The *Ch'ap'ing*! The biggest ship we've got! The I.G.'s flagship!"

"Wait a minute, Yule, wait a minute! The *Ch'ap'ing* to replace the *Hoilung* in Mirs Bay, and the *Hoilung* to go on into Bias Bay."

"The *Hoilung-ah*?" Peter used the name all South China junkmen use for the oldest cruiser in the Customs fleet. "Old Andy knows her well. If she went . . ."

"Better than if we lost his flagship."

"If we have to choose." Peter paused. "Mordent, it's risky. It's risky as hell."

"Everything in war is risky. It's simply a question of which risk."

That was the worst of arguing with Mordent. In so many things Peter saw eye to eye with him. It was a war, not a political situation, nor a China incident, and in war the good general is the man who chooses the right risk.

"I agree, but. . ."

"But! But!! But!!! We've been talking for half an hour and getting nowhere. Are you willing to help, or aren't you?" It was difficult for Mordent to be patient so long after his normal meal time. Even in the last quarter of an hour the lines on his face had deepened.

Because he understood, Peter kept his temper.

"Of course I'm willing to help. You know that, without asking. It's a question of assessing the risks."

"Risks? What do risks matter? What have you to lose?"

Peter opened his mouth to protest. What had he to lose? Everything. His career. The future. Primrose. He shut his mouth again. Maybe he had nothing to lose.

"Put like that, Mordent, it makes me wonder. Maybe I haven't so much to lose. I'm still a bachelor, and, I suppose, I may as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb." He sat back in his chair. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to come with me now and see the Commissioner."

"It's long after one. Archy'll have gone to tiffin hours ago."

"He hadn't when I came in."

"Saturday afternoon and everyone else gone home!" Peter stood up. "Well, I suppose, knowing Archy, I shouldn't be surprised." Walking along the corridor, he took Mordent by the arm. "You know, old man, you don't give that tummy of yours half a chance, eating at any old time and worrying yourself sick over..."

"I know, Yule, I know. But these cursed ships have me half out of my mind. If we can get this thing settled now, I'll go home and lie down."

At the Commissioner's door, Peter hesitated.

"Before we go in I want to say this. I'll do what I can for you, but if we start, we must start with the *Hoilung* or with something even smaller. I won't take the responsibility of suggesting one of the bigger ones, and I won't support you, if you do."

"All right, all right. We'll start with the *Hoilung*, only for God's sake, let's start."

Peter knocked and The Tribe's voice said:

"Come in." The Tribe was sitting on the edge of Archy's desk, one foot aswing, his hat on his knee. "Come in, gentlemen, come in. Pay no attention to me. I'm only here because I want your boss to come and have tiffin with me at the Hongkong club before we both starve to death. Unfortunately for me, he prefers to starve."

Peter could not suppress a mean feeling of relief. If they had found the Commissioner alone and had glossed over the threat from the Japanese destroyer, they might have won him over, but in the presence of a hungry and resentful Tribe they had no chance at all. He glanced at Mordent, wondering if he understood.

Mordent had scarcely seen The Tribe. He was tired and his stomach was sour. Once this matter was settled with the Commissioner, he could go home.

"Yes, Commander Mordent, what is it?" Archy hoped this would show The Tribe that it was sometimes necessary for the Commissioner to hold the fort.

"I want to see you about my ships, sir."

"Yes, Commander Mordent, what about them?" If only to annoy The Tribe, Archy was ready to listen for the rest of the afternoon.

The Tribe clasped his long fingers about a bony knee and rocked back on his tail, outwardly as willing as Archy to listen to whatever the Southern Commander had to say. He looked at Mordent and waited. Ships! The Tribe was as

well-disposed as a snake, though, like a snake, he was in no hurry. This rabbit was unconscious of danger. It would come closer; expose itself. When he was ready, he would strike.

Mordent spoke of his difficulties without animation. He explained his plan in detail without enthusiasm. He ended by saying that he had discussed the matter with the Preventive Deputy. They were in general agreement, so they had come in to lay the whole thing before the Commissioner.

The Tribe rocked forward and Peter moved closer to Mordent. The Tribe turned his head. Two rabbits? Two rabbits were as easy to deal with as one.

Peter looked at the Commissioner.

"I agree with Commander Mordent, sir. Something should be done."

"And so do I." The Tribe dropped his foot to the floor. "So do I." He moved into the middle of the room, his hands in his trouser pockets, his shoulders hunched. "After all, Archy, Commander Mordent knows what he's about. If, in his considered opinion, this Bias Bay scheme offers a solution to his troubles, then it should be adopted."

Peter's mouth hung open. If the snake had slid rabbit-wards with a lettuce leaf between its narrow lips, his mouth would have opened no wider.

The Tribe went on.

"Of course, Archy, there are risks, but you can't make omelets without breaking eggs." Archy understood proverbs—no thinking required.

"It's easy enough to talk about slipping through T'uniang Pass, but we mustn't forget the Japanese destroyer." Peter was shaken and it showed in his voice.

"Of course, Peter, of course." The Tribe waved the destroyer aside. "But, before putting up your scheme, you and Mordent will naturally have taken her presence into consideration."

"Yes, and no, sir."

"Yes and no!" The Tribe's eyebrows arched. "Is this the champion of the junks?"

Mordent shifted uneasily on his feet.

Archy interposed. Like all timorous people, he was no judge of danger. He believed that what he feared was dangerous, and that what he did not, was not. Moreover he was piqued. He was the Commissioner. The Southern Commander had come into his office to consult him, but no one seemed anxious to hear what he had to say.

"Like you, Tribe, I see Commander Mordent's point of view, and, like you, I sympathize with it. Naturally it is demoralizing for both officers and men, for their ships to lie idle week after week. Something must be done, and, if it is risky, then risks must be taken. After all we can try Commander Mordent's scheme." He looked to see that everyone was listening. "No harm in trying." He leant back, secure behind the platitude. If the scheme had been that he should jump out of the window, he would not have been.

"Suppose I was to spend Sunday—tomorrow—in Mirs Bay on one of the smaller launches having a look round?" The more people who agreed with the scheme, the less Peter liked it.

"I have no small launch available." Mordent wanted his scheme approved.

"I know, Mordent." Peter turned to him. "But Frost has the *Fumments'ai*. I could use her, and . . ."

"Good idea!" Archy had stayed late in the office and events had justified him, but now it was time for tiffin. "Good idea, Peter. See Frost and fix details yourself. Report to me on Monday." He came from behind his desk. "And now that we've settled their problems for them, Tribe,"—Archy felt the 'we' was magnanimous—"we can go to tiffin." At the door he turned. "And don't forget, Peter, no harm in trying."

The Tribe went out, leaving the door open. The snake had gone and the rabbits were still alive. But, with a snake's arrogance, he left the way of escape open, confident they could not avail themselves of it. When he was ready, he would come back.

Mordent moved to follow.

"You'll make your own arrangements with Frost."

"Yes, Mordent, yes I will. I'll have a good look round, and . . ."

"All right. Only don't panic when you see the Jap."

"I won't. I'm as keen on your plan as you are."

Mordent belched. He should have eaten hours ago.

"I'll push on home. See you Monday."

"All right. We'll go in and see the Commissioner together. And don't worry. I'm as anxious as you are to see your ships at sea."

Mordent did not answer. He went down the corridor to fetch his hat. He recognized vain repetition when he heard it.

Peter spent Sunday in Mirs Bay with Geordie Skate on the *Fuments'ai*. Geordie and his dog were good company. They called on Cowper Kwok at Sha-u-chung and they had a swim. But, as soon as they rounded Mirs Point, they saw the low shape of the Japanese destroyer against Samun. No wisp of smoke rose from her squat misshapen funnel; nevertheless there was about her a look of lightly sleeping menace.

"I wouldn't call her exactly harmless, Geordie, even at this distance."

"No more she is, sir." Geordie cleared his throat and selected an oncoming wave. "No more she is."

"And she's not far outside British waters."

"British waters!" Geordie's wave passed scathless. "A fat lot the yellow scum care for British waters." He spat over the side into the smooth flow of green water. "But don't you worry, sir. They don't know we're here. The old *Fuments'ai* is hidden against Mirs Point and we're making no smoke."

Peter glanced back and saw the Customs flag blowing from the stern.

"The flag's a bit conspicuous, isn't it?"

"Right you are, sir. Big as a bed sheet. Bos'un!"

The bos'un came on pattering feet and the offending flag was run down.

In the evening Peter landed at Taipo jetty and drove home over the Kowloon hills. He tasted salt on his lips and thought of cold beer. He began to hum. Then he remembered the destroyer and stopped humming. He had not liked the look of her at all.

On Monday morning he put his head into Mordent's office. The Southern Commander was not there and his marine clerk did not know when to expect him. Peter decided to wait. In the afternoon, the clerk came in to say that the Southern Commander was not at all well and did not expect to be in the office again till the end of the week. Peter went down the corridor to the Commissioner's office.

Archy and The Tribe were there.

"Well, Peter, I hear poor old Mordent is sick." Archy leant back in his chair. "And how did your trip go?"

"Need you ask, Archy?" The Tribe sat on the window ledge, his ankles crossed. "Look at his face. Sun and sea breezes. It must have been as good as a picnic."

"The weather was all right, sir—and the visibility. It didn't make the Japanese destroyer look any friendlier."

"Oh, so she was there after all." Archy believed nothing unpleasant till he had to.

"Anchored off Samun, only a few miles outside British waters—so-called."

"Hmm! I don't care for the sound of that." Archy looked at The Tribe.

"Certainly this requires thought." The Tribe sounded non-committal. He was as non-committal as a cobra swaying upward with gently expanding hood. "You'll need a very experienced officer, Archy. Pity Mordent isn't here to advise us." He patted his head. The divorce would damage Peter, and so, incidentally, damage his career, but if he lost one of Old Andy's ships! "What about Captain Sloane? He's your senior captain, and I believe Mordent thinks the world of him." The Tribe had no grounds for any such belief. He did, however, know that Sloane had hoped to be Southern Commander in Mordent's place, and that Mordent's appointment over his head had been a rude shock.

"But Sloane has the *Ch'ap'ing*!" To Peter the *Ch'ap'ing* was only a little smaller than the *Queen Mary*. He turned to the Commissioner. "Really, sir, we must use as small a ship as possible—that is, if we try the scheme at all."

"Oh, come now, Peter!" Archy had the lead he wanted. "We agreed to give the scheme a trial. You remember, we said no harm in trying. Mordent's very keen and we mustn't let him down when he's not here to speak for himself. The only question for us is which ship and which captain."

"I see, sir."

"And from what Peter himself says, it's a job for an experienced officer." The Tribe looked up from admiring the polish of his shoes. "For the most experienced officer we've got."

"We need someone who knows what he's about." Peter spoke grudgingly. He did not think that an officer who had been axed from the Navy and who was habitually insolent to his subordinates, was the best possible choice, however senior he was. "But the *Ch'ap'ing* is far too big. Personally. . . ."

"Yes, Peter?" Archy was ready to listen to anyone.

"Not only do I think we should use the *Hoilung*, as Mordent suggested, but I think, whoever is placed in command, should have definite instructions to choose the darkest night he can find, and on no account should he fly a flag while he's in Mirs Bay or off Mirs Point."

"Astonishing!" The Tribe raised his eyebrows. "Peter, you sound like an old woman. Why all these precautions in Mirs Bay? You said yourself it was British waters."

"British waters so-called." Peter turned to Archy. "As you know, sir, more than half the coast line is Chinese. If the Japs see a large Chinese Customs flag in Mirs Bay, they may decide to treat it as Chinese waters for the time being."

"Nonsense, Peter! Nonsense! Look at this," Archy pointed to the War Office map under the glass top of his desk. "The whole of Mirs Bay to Mirs Point is shown here as British. If the Japs violate British waters, there will be questions asked in The House. *The Times*..."

"I see, sir." Peter wondered if Archy thought a leader in *The Times* would compensate Old Andy for the loss of a ship.

The Tribe looked from one to the other with his hard bright eyes. He had given Peter plenty of rope, but he had never expected anything like this. All he had to do now was visit a grocer's shop and a flat—both in Kowloon. That would not take long. He patted his head. He did not see how Peter could escape.

Peter knew The Tribe was satisfied with the turn of events and it made him nervous.

"Well, sir, Mordent isn't here and it's his plan. Couldn't we wait till Friday? He's sure to be back in the office by then."

"Why not?" Archy never believed in doing anything today that he could put off till tomorrow, or, better still, the day after.

"Why not indeed?" The Tribe smiled amiably.

Peter tried not to listen.

"And by the end of the week there'll be no moon."

"Magnificent!" The Tribe stood up from the window ledge. "Magnificent, Peter! You think of everything. If we sow the seeds of our enchantment in the dark o' the moon, no one will know what we're up to."

"All right, Peter." Archy dismissed him with a nod. "When Mordent gets back and you've arranged details between you, come in and see me again."

Peter was glad to go. The interview had frightened him. It was as if the snake had said:

"Any time you like, rabbit. Any way you like." Thinking in his flat evil head. "What difference does it make to me?"

At his desk, Peter turned over the pages of a dossier on

gold bar smuggling. The runners were female, and Peter had a shrewd idea where they carried the bars an over-modest female searcher had failed repeatedly to find. But he could raise no interest in the case. He decided to go home. After tea he would take Babetty for a walk.

The Tribe met him in the lift.

"I didn't expect to run into you, Peter. Not afraid to leave the old man to hold the fort?"

"No, sir." Peter managed a smile. "I've had enough of the office, so I thought I'd go home for tea."

"Same idea occurred to me—tea and a chocolate eclair at The Grips."

In the street The Tribe turned up Queen's road.

"I might come back to the office later, but now it's tea and a cream bun at the hotel."

"Good-bye, sir." Peter lifted his hat. Across the road he saw the big windows of Wan Hsing, The Jeweller, and he walked more slowly. The Tribe had told him the same thing twice, in as many minutes. Why? If he meant to have tea at The Grips, it was enough to say so once. Why repeat it? Peter stopped and looked back.

The Tribe had reached the side entrance to the hotel. He saw Peter look round, and, as he disappeared, he waved. He might have been waiting for Peter to look.

Peter shook himself. Why shouldn't The Tribe eat eclairs at the hotel, if he wanted to? Maybe he enjoyed finding cream he thought was in his mouth sticking to his fingers. He could stuff himself with the wretched things, if it gave him any pleasure. Peter went on down Queen's road towards Statue square.

He had parked his car near the praya. As he reached it, a Star ferry left the nearby pier for Kowloon. A tall man with a stoop, who had obviously just managed to catch the ferry, was making his way forward to a seat. Peter watched him sit down, take off his hat and pat the top of his head. Peter stopped dead with his hand on the car door. He would have known that gesture anywhere in China—anywhere in the world.

So the eclair story had been bunkum? Peter stared after the ferry. But why? And why rush over to Kowloon in the middle of the afternoon? What was there so exciting in Kowloon? If The Tribe had been ten years younger and there had been a bit of stuff who's husband was still in the office. . . .?

Peter opened the door and got in. He sat staring at the dash-board. Kowloon? T. L. Chuang owned The Kowloon Wine and Grocery Store and people said he visited it every afternoon on his way to take tea with Lotus Bud. Lotus Bud was his Soochow concubine. That was as it should be. What was the old Chinese jungle :

' God has the whole of Heaven for his fun,
But man has Soo and Hang, when the day's done.'

Soochow and Hangchow, the places where all good concubines come from. Peter wondered where Lotus Bud wore her jade crab. He put the ignition key into the lock.

And, of course, Captain Sloane and his Italian-looking wife lived in a flat in Kowloon. But The Tribe wouldn't know that, or, if he did, he wouldn't know where the flat was. If he wanted to see Captain Sloane, he'd send for him.

Peter started the car. The Tribe was always up to something. God alone knew what it was this time.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

BABETTY raced round the hibiscus hedge and across the lawn. As the old tennis ball bounced, she leapt, ears back, body at full stretch. Her teeth shut on it like a trap.

" Good bitchee ! Fetch it to master."

Babetty flopped on her belly, the ball between her paws, her ears cocked. She bent her head and chewed the cover. It was time master went to office.

" You disobedient bitch !" Peter found a stone under the hedge. She watched it fall on the grass beside her. He picked up his Hongkong basket and went down the path to the garage. Below the sea wrinkled and glinted in the morning sun.

It was Friday and there was work to be done in the office, and plenty to do out of it. Mordent would be back and they were to discuss the Bias Bay plan once more, before they saw the Commissioner. That might take an hour. An hour and a half at the outside. At eleven o'clock Peter hoped to catch the ferry to Kowloon and meet the Canton express. The Tribe had asked Sir Christopher to have tiffin with him and Archy at The Grips, and there was some talk of golf at Deep Water Bay afterwards, if The Tribe could

find a fourth. But Primrose had promised on the telephone to go straight from the train to Big Wave Bay. In his basket Peter had a picnic lunch and his swimming trunks.

At the garage door he looked at the sky. Fat clouds drifted steadily north before the breath of the monsoon. He lifted the rumble seat and made sure the surf boards were there, before he pushed the basket into the boot behind his head.

The previous night on the telephone, Primrose had been more interested in his junk war than in the Governor's ball. Apparently she had heard recent news of it from Esther, but she wanted details from him. She had laughed over his method of getting his own way and she hoped the junks would stay at sea. In any event she was especially glad that he had done all he could for them.

Peter felt in his trouser pocket for the car key. He thanked his stars that she had heard nothing else from Esther. He had not written to Jo, and no letter had come from him. He fitted the key into the switch. Jo might have thought better of it.

Peter started the car. It was not altogether impossible. Jo might have changed his mind. The wretched thing might blow over. Tom Backhouse, the Governor's A.D.C., had a theory that, no matter how bad anything seemed, all you had to do was carry on, unmoved, for three weeks. Tom's troubles revolved round young women who were, or feared they were, pregnant and blamed it on Tom. Peter had never understood what good it did them, if Tom remained unmoved for the required period. But it was undeniable that Tom retained his popularity with the opposite sex.

As Peter turned onto the road, the Commissioner's car disappeared round Magazine Gap corner. Through the back window he caught a glimpse of golf clubs and a soft hat. The Tribe must have found a fourth after all. So much the better. Peter meant to spend the whole afternoon at Big Wave. In fact, apart from the morning's work with Mordent, he meant to do little over the week-end except amuse Primrose.

As he drove down from The Peak, he thought over Mordent's plan. It was risky, but not as risky as it had seemed at first. If the *Hoilung* made the attempt at night and flew no flag, there should be no trouble. Moverover, there was an obvious advantage in replacing the *Hoilung* with the *Ch'ap'ing*. If Captain Sloane was at sea in his own ship, he could not take command of the *Hoilung*. It

was true that, during the week, The Tribe had gone out of his way to speak as if it was settled that Captain Sloane should lead the Bias Bay venture. Nevertheless, even if The Tribe and Mordent insisted on Sloane, Peter had an idea that the arrangement would not last long. Sloane's wife would not approve of her husband patrolling in another man's ship, unable to get into Hongkong for leave except by a round-about journey—and then only when a wagon was available—while his own ship was working in Mirs Bay, less than an hour by road from their flat in Kowloon. She would end by pestering the life out of the Southern Commander till her husband was brought in to resume his marital duties at least at weekends. Marriage without a regular Saturday night was a farce to Doris Sloane.

In his office Peter attended to the contents of his 'in' tray. Shortly after half past nine he strolled along the corridor to the Southern Commander's room, knocked at the door and went in. There was a chart table by the window, one of its narrow drawers half-open and a chart of Mirs and Bias Bay lying on the table-top. A pair of dividers and a needle sharp pencil lay on the chart. The walls were lined with framed photographs of Customs cruisers, most of them taken at sea. Mordent was at his desk. There was a photograph of the *Ch'ap'ing* behind his head, taken in heavy weather in the Haitan straits.

"Good morning, Mordent. Glad to see you back in the office."

Mordent looked up.

"Oh, hullo, Yule." His face was grey and tired, the lines to the corners of his mouth deeply etched.

"How's the tummy?"

"So so. Might be worse."

"Pity you couldn't take the weekend off." Peter glanced out of the window. "Just the weather for it."

"Maybe so. But I'm four days behind with my ordinary work and there's this Bias Bay plan."

"Of course." Peter sat on the edge of the desk. "You heard I made the trip in the *Fuments'ai* with Geordie Skate on Sunday?"

"I heard." Mordent picked up his own dividers from the desk. With them between his fingers he remembered his time in the merchant marine. There had been no everlasting pain then under his ribs.

"I've thought about it a good deal since."

"Have you?" Mordent walked the dividers across the blotter.

"It seems to me, the best thing is to do as you suggested in the first place: send the *Hoilung* out under her own skipper. As you said, she's the most efficient ship you've got. Then the *Ch'ap'ing* can take her place in Mirs Bay." He waited. "That was your original idea, wasn't it?"

Mordent nodded.

It was his original idea with The Tribe's subsequent emendation omitted. The omission was slight, but, for Mordent, important. Sloane was his senior captain and had hoped to be Southern Commander in his place, and Sloane's name had been mentioned. It was important that neither the Commissioner nor Mr. Tribe should get the impression that the man who had been promoted over Captain Sloane was inclined to slight him. Mordent neither liked nor trusted his senior captain, but, until Sloane made a mistake, he was in no position to say so. Besides, he considered that the risks had been magnified, and for this he blamed the Deputy. Now it was obvious the plan would be adopted, the Deputy was ready to accept it in its original form, but Mordent did not see why that should influence him unduly. Also Mordent's stomach was very sour. He put down his dividers.

"It sounds all right, Yule, but we—or at any rate I—can't afford to ignore the Commissioner and Mr. Tribe. They want me to use Captain Sloane in the *Hoilung*, so, of course, I must use him."

'Of course,' is a sign that the speaker can think of no good reason for what he has said, or, more often, that there is not one. It was on the tip of Peter's tongue to ask:

"Why 'of course'?"

But he did not ask. Mordent was tired and ill, and, through no fault of his own, irritable. Moreover, Peter was confident that, even if Sloane was chosen, Doris Sloane would see he did not stay in Bias Bay long enough to do any harm. He changed the subject.

"By the way, Skate and I both noticed that the most conspicuous thing about the *Fuments'ai* was her flag."

"Yes?"

"I think, whoever is put in charge of the *Hoilung*, should be told not to fly a flag in either bay, and most certainly not when he makes the attempt on the pass."

"I agree. Flying a Customs flag would be asking for trouble."

"And don't you think the attempt should be made at night?"

"The edge of dark, I'd say. We must be able to see where the Jap is. It would be disastrous if we ran close by her in the dark and she turned a searchlight on us." It was Mordent's plan and he was not prepared to accept every suggestion the Deputy liked to make.

"I see." Peter was not satisfied, but Mordent had agreed about the flag and that mattered most. "Anyway, I'm glad you agree about the flag."

"And I'm glad you accept my plan." Mordent glanced up from walking his dividers back and forth. "I was afraid last Saturday you were backing out."

"I'm sorry. I kept imagining dangers where there weren't any."

Mordent smiled faintly.

"I noticed Mr. Tribe seemed to think you were acting out of character."

"The Tribe thought I was acting out of character?" Peter's eyes opened wide. "Oh well, why bother about him. I don't see how your plan can go wrong now."

"I doubt if any plan's as good as that." Mordent sat back in his chair. "Still, it should work. Personally, I've never anticipated trouble from the Jap."

"I'm sure you're right." Peter stood up. There was a pause. "Well, shouldn't we go in now and see the old man?"

Mordent shook his head.

"He isn't in. He was in for a few minutes, but he went out again. I met him on his way to the lift."

"Went out again? The old goat. Where to?"

"To Deep Water Bay, I think, to play golf."

"Who with?"

"With Mr. Tribe."

"Damn it and them." Peter went to the window. "They were to play golf in the afternoon. The Tribe knew we wanted to see Archy this morning, and he knew I wanted to meet the express from Canton. He might at least have left Archy where we could get at him."

"Well, you can still meet the train." Mordent glanced at the clock over the door. "It's only just ten."

"But I'm not coming back. At least I hope I'm not. And, if I don't, when can we see the old man?"

"Can't I see him for both of us?"

"Could you?"

"Why not? It's my plan and they're my ships."

"You're sure you wouldn't mind?"

"Why should I mind?" Mordent smiled. "You go and meet Miss Gartrell. I hear she's very pretty."

"She is. I must introduce you sometime." Peter paused. "And, whoever takes the *Hoilung* out, you'll see he understands about the flag?"

"Captain Sloane is coming in later this morning."

"Oh."

Mordent sensed Peter's dissatisfaction, and, to some extent, shared it, but he could not say so.

"The arrangement was made while I was ill."

"I see."

Mordent waited, but Peter meant to leave this to time and Doris Sloane.

"All right then. You'll see the old man and tell him what we've decided." Peter moved from the window.

"When do you expect to make the attempt?"

"Tomorrow evening."

Peter walked to the door.

"I expect Archy will look in just before tiffin on his way to The Grips." He paused. "You'll be sure Sloane understands about the flag?"

"You leave it and him to me."

"Good man. I'll get my basket and push off before anyone stops me."

In his office Peter glanced at his empty desk. There were no more comments to come. There was nothing to do now but wait and see what the Inspectorate would do. With any luck the junks would stay at sea and so would Mordent's ships.

He looked at the high clouds drifting across the sky. Primrose liked to pretend that it was always a flat calm when he took her to Big Wave Bay to surf. With this wind the waves would be big and strong. He picked up his basket. The Governor's ball would be fun too, if nothing happened to upset her. Of course, he would have to tell her about this wretched Esther affair, though he would look a fool,

for all, nothing came of it. He paused, one hand on the

At any rate there was no point in spoiling her weekend.

ask her to dine with him on Sunday night and tell

He went down the corridor to the lifts. Even up for the ball, he could do nothing till Monday.

Sunday would be time enough. Peter rang for the lift, feeling like a boy out of school.

In his office Mordent worked through a mound of papers. Now and then he belched, but he told himself that the acid flavour was less than usual. As it grew late, he glanced occasionally at the clock. At a quarter past one, he rang for his marine clerk.

"Commissioner not come yet?"

"No, sir, not yet."

Mordent suppressed a belch more acid than the last. The Commissioner would scarcely be in now till after tiffin, and it was time he had something to eat himself. He began to put his papers away. There was a knock at the door.

Mordent paused and looked up.

"Come in."

Captain Sloane came in. He wore a flannel suit and a Navy tie. He meant to look like a naval officer on shore. With less effort he might have succeeded.

Sloane was slight and fair, with pale hard eyes. Despite Dartmouth, and some service at sea before the Navy found him out, he had no manners at all except bad manners, and, since his marriage, they had not improved.

"Oh, it's you," Mordent leant back in his chair. "You haven't seen the Commissioner anywhere, have you?"

"I thought it was me you wanted to see."

"So it is."

Sloane tossed his hat on the desk and sat down. He adjusted his tie. It, and his habit of omitting 'sir' when he spoke to the Southern Commander, were outward signs of his inward weakness.

Mordent paid no more attention to the tie than he did to the discourtesy.

"It's about this Bias Bay patrol."

"Ah yes." Sloane saw Mordent's dividers and picked them up. "The Tribe and Archy spoke to me about that a couple of days ago."

"Did they?" Mordent wished Sloane would put his dividers down. "Then, I take it, you know all about it."

"Well, no, not exactly." Under Mordent's scrutiny Sloane fumbled with his tie. "You see you weren't in the office. . . ."

"I see. At any rate you know what is proposed?"

"Oh yes." Sloane swallowed a 'sir.' "I know I shall be needed."

"That's right. You will be. But for the moment we need you, not your ship. To begin with, if the Commissioner approves, we intend to use the *Hoilung*."

Sloane nodded vaguely. He did not seem interested.

Mordent curbed a feeling of irritation. Sloane irritated him, but irritation made his stomach worse.

"So tomorrow I want you to join the *Hoilung* at Taipo."

Sloane stared at the picture of the *Ch'ap'ing* above Mordent's head.

Mordent picked up a pencil and began to explain his plan in detail. As he talked he used the pencil to join the holes his dividers had made in the blotter. He gave a time after sunset for the attempt on the pass and he laid stress on the order that the *Hoilung* should fly no flag.

Sloane confined himself to :

"Ah." "Yes, of course." "No, naturally not." He made no comments and he offered no suggestions.

It was like hitting a ball against a wall. Each time the ball bounced to be hit again. Mordent glanced at the clock. It was a quarter to two. A belch, sour with the taste of vomit, rose in his throat.

"I'm sorry, Captain Sloane." He pushed his chair back. "I must have something to eat." He stood up. "Have you had tiffin?"

"Oh yes. I had a snack before I came in." That had been The Tribe's idea. "I'll wait here till you come back. If the clerk isn't monopolizing the typewriter, I have a couple of letters I can write."

"All right. If the Commissioner comes while I'm away, tell him I'll be back almost at once."

Sloane nodded.

Mordent was back in fifteen minutes, but there was still no sign of the Commissioner. As he settled down to work, he could hear Sloane's two-fingered tapping next door. By half past two he had tasted all his hastily eaten meal a second time. The words blurred, cleared and blurred again. His forehead was damp. Twice he sent his clerk to look for the Commissioner.

At three o'clock Sloane strolled in with the air of a man whose correspondence is up to date.

Mordent rang again. The clerk, bored by this time, put his head round the door and shook it.

Sloane watched. When he was Southern Commander,

clerks would be kept in their place. He waited till the clerk had withdrawn his head.

"Archy not come yet? Too bad." He pretended to notice Mordent's distress for the first time. "What's the matter, Mordent? Feeling rotten?"

"As a matter of fact I am." Mordent wiped his face. "I'm afraid I ate my tiffin too quickly in case the Commissioner came while I was out."

"Pity." Sloane strolled to the window. "Specially as there was no real hurry." He stood with his back to the room. "Nice weather for golf too. If Archy and The Tribe tiffed at Deep Water, they'll play again in the afternoon. Shouldn't be surprised if Archy doesn't show up till six—or even later. You know what he's like."

"I hope you're wrong." Mordent knew he could not hold out till six.

Sloane looked round.

"Why don't you go home if you're feeling rotten? I'm meeting Doris for a cocktail at Bessie's bar round about seven, but I've nothing to do till then. I can just as well wait here, as in a cinema. Then, when he does turn up, I can tell Archy whatever he needs to know."

Mordent hesitated.

"You're sure you understood my instructions?"

"Quite sure. I know what's needed."

"All right, Captain Sloane." Mordent got to his feet. "You explain to the Commissioner what the Deputy and I have agreed upon, get his approval and put the plan into operation tomorrow." Mordent picked up his hat. "And please explain to the Commissioner why I couldn't wait—and thank you for waiting for me."

Sloane stood up, but he did not reply.

When Mordent had gone, he sat down in the empty chair. It was comfortable and the office was large. It would save trouble if Mordent decided on his way home to his bungalow at Pokfulan to give up the unequal struggle with his stomach ulcers. But there was no chance of that. Men of the merchant navy were notoriously tough.

Sloane pressed the bell. When the clerk had come all the way in and was standing waiting in front of the desk, Sloane told him to keep a sharp look-out for the Commissioner. Then he settled down to wait. He did not expect to wait long. In fact he waited till half past six. If he could make

success certain, The Tribe did not care how long Captain Sloane waited.

As soon as the clerk announced the Commissioner, Sloane went down the corridor past the lifts, straightening his tie. He knocked.

"Come in." Archy looked up from a crowded desk. "Oh, it's you, is it, Captain Sloane. I was expecting the Southern Commander."

Sloane thought:

"You old fool! I am the Southern Commander." But his thoughts did not discolour his voice.

"I quite understand, sir." The 'sir' was generously stressed. "But Commander Mordent asked me to wait in his place."

"What's the matter? Is he ill again?"

"I imagine so, sir."

"Tut, tut, I am sorry. Mordent is having a wretched time. He really ought to apply for leave."

A week ago Sloane would have voiced his whole-hearted agreement, but leave for Mordent had lost its appeal. A man comes back from leave. When he is dismissed, he stays away.

"However, we'll talk about that some other time. Now, with the Southern Commander ill and Peter Yule away picnicking, you and I must make up our minds about the Bias Bay scheme by ourselves." He smiled paternally. "But we shall manage, Captain Sloane, we shall manage. Two heads, as they say, are better than one."

Sloane did not feel called upon to comment.

"Well now, Captain Sloane, tell me again what is proposed?"

"As I understand it, sir, the Deputy and Mordent"—in omitting Mordent's rank, Sloane was only anticipating events—"want me to undertake the initial patrol."

"I thought they would agree to that. Mr. Tribe said at tiffin they would." Archy paused. "Mr. Tribe also hoped they would arrange for you to take your first officer—Mr. Reese, is it not?—along with you. He suggested that the captain of the *Hoilung* might move temporarily to the *Ch'ap'ing* to make room for Mr. Reese."

Sloane said nothing. This was critical. Reese was dark and obscurely Welch, but he followed Sloane about like a Welch sheep dog, and, apart from an occasional snarl, he paid no attention to anyone else. What Sloane told him to see, he would see; that and nothing else.

"I must say it seemed a reasonable suggestion to me" Archy waited. "Was nothing said about Mr. Reese?"

"I'm afraid not, sir."

"But surely, Captain Sloane, you need some support in a strange ship? Come, come, speak out, man. What do you think of the idea?"

"I think it's a very good idea indeed, sir, if I may be allowed to say so. I..." Sloane hesitated.

Archy smiled.

"And, if you weren't so loyal, you'd feel inclined to ask why someone hadn't thought of it sooner?"

Sloane smiled deferentially.

"Well, sir, that isn't for me to say, but it's a very good idea, and..."

"And you'd like Mr. Reese?"

"Yes sir. If I may have him."

"Of course you may have him." Archy fiddled with a pencil.

From the outset too many people had told him how to run this scheme. He was the Commissioner but no one waited for him to make suggestions. Only Captain Sloane stood quietly in front of his desk and said:

"Yes, sir" and "No, sir."

"Mr. Tribe and I cannot be expected to think of everything, Captain Sloane. I must say I think either the Deputy or the Southern Commander should have given more thought to your position in a strange ship."

Sloane said nothing. He did not know where this was leading.

"For myself, I have never understood why you should be moved in the first place. If you prefer your own first officer—and why should you not?—wouldn't you still rather have your own crew and, Captain Sloane, your own ship?"

Sloane swallowed. The *Ch'ap'ing*! Not even The Tribe had thought of that. The loss of the *Hoiling* might have been enough, but if the I.G.'s flagship went....!

"Well, Captain Sloane, what do you say?"

Sloane swallowed again and found his voice.

"Nothing, sir, would please me better."

"I thought as much." Archy smiled with quiet satisfaction. "Very well, then, you shall have your own ship. And when can you be ready to start?" Now it was done, Archy wanted to get it over.

"Tomorrow, sir." The *Ch'ap'ing* could be lost as easily with a dirty bottom as with a clean one.

"Good. You'll get into Bias Bay unseen, we hope. You are, I understand, to round Mirs Point on the edge of dark and you are not to fly a flag."

"That, sir, is correct." It was unfortunate that the loquacious old fool had remembered about the flag, but Reese would see no flag if he was told to see none, and Reese would make all the relevant entries in the log. Even if the question was raised at the Court of Inquiry, once the Japs had finished with her, who could prove whether the *Ch'ap'ing* flew a flag or not?

"Once in Bias Bay you will stay on patrol till you can be relieved."

"Yes sir." Sloane squared his shoulders. "I think, sir, you can rely on the officers and men of the C.P.S. *Ch'ap'ing*—and incidentally on myself—carrying out your orders to the best of our ability."

"I'm sure I can, Captain Sloane, and I like the way you speak first of your officers and men"—he was meant to—"but chiefly we rely on your wide experience to make a success of this somewhat risky adventure."

"Thank you very much, sir. I'll do my best."

"I'm sure you will." Archy picked up his fountain pen. It was an outsize in pens. Archy believed in looking the part, even if he could not play it. "And now, Captain Sloane, you'd better cut along. You'll have plenty on your hands, and, as you see, I have a full desk." He smiled bravely. "I doubt if I shall get away from the office much before eight." Even so, Archy would have been in the office for only two hours, but he did not think of that. His mind had long since given up interfering with its owner's phantasy by thinking.

"Yes sir, I can see you're busy." Sloane smiled sympathetically. "And, as you say, I shall have my hands full, if I am to get away to sea tomorrow." After cocktails with Doris at The Grips that was a safe bet.

In the lift, Sloane smirked at the lift Boy's back. As usual, The Tribe had been right. It had been money for old rope. He must telephone Reese. By Sunday night they would have something to celebrate.

He stuck one hand into a jacket pocket. It found
ing hard and he took it out. It was Mordent's dividers.
them into the air, caught them expertly and dropped
into his pocket.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ON Saturday evening Peter stood in front of his dressing table adjusting his tie. In the mirror, Te waited with his master's mess jacket. Peter was pleased with his tie, pleased with his jacket and pleased with himself. The sun at Big Wave had deepened his tan and the waves had pounded his body till he felt new—made from head to heel. The eyes that looked back at him were bright as The Tribe's. He cocked his tie a fraction higher and thought of Primrose. In her bathing suit, tossed about by green seas, laughing, excited and faintly bruised along one thigh, she had looked as foam-born as Aphrodite.

The telephone rang and he jumped over the bed to answer it.

A gay voice said :

"Stop admiring yourself in the mirror and come and fetch me. Bonzo and Christopher left hours ago."

"How do you know I was admiring myself? You don't even know I'm in my bedroom. I might be answering the telephone from the hall."

"I don't believe it. You wouldn't have answered so quickly. You must have nipped over the bed."

"What is this? second sight?"

"So you were admiring yourself! I bet Te is fed up."

"He does look a bit sour. But I wasn't admiring myself. I was thinking you looked foam-born yesterday."

"Foam-born! I'm sure I looked wet and sandy, if that's what you mean. I know my costume was full of sand. Anyway it was fun. I could have stayed in all day."

"Well, you did, didn't you?"

"I know, and quite forgot to ask you all the questions I meant to."

"Questions? What questions?" He went on, before she could reply. "Anyway, you can ask me anything you like tomorrow night. Don't forget you're dining with me,—alone."

"Dear, Peter, don't try and sound frightening. You'll be much more frightened by my questions."

"Shall I? What do you want to know?"

"What I shall always want to know where you are concerned."

"What's that?"

"What you've been up to."

"I haven't been up to anything."

"Oh yes, you have. Esther and I have decided that you're like The Tribe—always up to something. I don't know that I approve."

"Primrose, darling, am I to pick you up and take you to a ball, or do I spend the rest of the evening listening to your idle chatter?"

"Both, Peter dear. And it's not as idle as you think." The telephone clicked.

Peter smiled. She was beautiful and she was a dear and she was no fool. As he slipped on his jacket, he caught sight of himself in the mirror. Some of her questions might not be easy to answer. They had tiffed at the Sheko club, with her father, The Tribe, Esther and Archy. Once or twice the conversation had made him nervous. Not that he had any need to be. On Sunday night he would tell her everything. He went down the stairs and out of the front door to his car.

The night was dark. As he started the engine he hoped the *Hoilung* was safely anchored in Bias Bay. He had not been able to find out what had been decided in the office after he had left. Mordent was ill again, and, when he had mentioned Bias Bay to Archy over a gin at the club, the Commissioner had pushed the inquiry aside.

"Don't worry yourself, my boy. I saw to everything myself. We can depend on Captain Sloane carrying out my instructions. By tonight he and his ship will be in Bias Bay."

Peter would have liked to make sure that the orders about the flag had been passed on, but Esther and Primrose joined them. As Archy went forward to greet them, he said over his shoulder:

"Now, no more shop like a good chap. The ladies will be more interested in a gimlet than in our Bias Bay worries."

Peter drove along the road. A thousand feet below, the harbour lights gleamed in the black water. Along the North Wall the awnings of a cruiser glowed from the blaze of lights on her quarter-deck—obviously a dinner party on board before the ball.

Primrose waited on the top step. She wore a long white dress with a narrow gold belt round her waist, her neck and arms a warmer gold from the sun. She ran down to the car.

"I heard you coming." She slipped into the seat beside

him, tucking in her dress, and put up her face. "Mind my make-up. I must look extra beautiful tonight."

"You always look beautiful." He turned the car and drove slowly back the way he had come.

"Peter dear, it's after nine."

"I know, but there's no sense in getting there before half past." He smiled at her in the dark. "Besides, it's only a Governor's ball."

"Darling!" She pinched his arm. "I see I'm going to have trouble turning you into a respectable husband." She put her hand over his on the steering wheel. "But I don't mind if we're a bit late for once. I haven't had you to myself since I came down. Either it's been waves or people."

"You'll have me to yourself tomorrow night."

"I know. I'm counting on that. I want to hear all about your junk war and" She hesitated. "And I want to hear all about whatever's going on in Bias Bay."

Peter laughed.

"I thought that pointed nose of yours wasn't missing much."

"Why should it?" She waited.

"There isn't much to tell. The Bias Bay scheme is all part of the junk war. If the junks are to keep the sea, so must the Customs cruisers. We have sent one of the smaller cruisers into Bias Bay as a start, that being one of the few moderately safe places left."

"I understand." She watched the headlights feel out the road. "I like all you tell me about this junk war of yours. Junks are part of China. You must always help them."

"I am helping them."

"Peter dear!" She put her head close to his. "And you'll always tell me what you're doing, in case I can help. I might be able to, you know. I'm Christopher Gartrell's daughter. Even he admits it."

"Why shouldn't he? He should be proud to be your papa. I know I would be."

"You aren't going to be. You're going to be the father of my children and they're going to be proud of their papa."

"Are they? Are you sure?"

"Certain."

"Are there going to be many of them?"

"As many as you want—I hope. Even if it hurts a bit."

He drove in silence. The girl beside him was growing up reaching out to life—even if it hurt a bit. And he had not

been man enough to tell her about this Esther business. In the dark under his tan, his face burnt uncomfortably.

"Goodness, Peter, what a silence!" She spoke lightly, but her hand tightened on his. "Did I frighten you?"

"No, darling." He kissed her hair to give himself time. "I only hope I'm fit to be the father of your children."

"Peter, what a thing to say! Of course you're fit. That's why I chose you." She kissed his cheek. "But I love you for saying it all the same."

They turned into the gates of Government House behind a long line of cars. As they reached the red carpeted steps, Primrose opened the door.

"Evenin', Primrose." Tom Backhouse came forward. "Allow me." He helped her out. "Mmh, what a frock! What's Peter got, I haven't?" He put his head into the car. "Go and park, old man. Owner-drivers to the right, near but please not on the lawn. I'll keep an eye on your lovely."

Peter was back in a few minutes.

Tom was in his regimentals, a fabulous red stripe down a narrow blue trouser, the trouser strapped under a boot that shone as though varnished. Tom was big and blonde. He claimed to be the reincarnation of the Tipton Slasher and he looked like a Regency buck. He pressed the upturned end of his moustache with the back of a finger.

"Well, that didn't take long! Bet you parked on the lawn. M'employer'll make me pay."

"I did not. I parked where you said." Peter looked round. "Where's Primrose?"

"What's the trouble? Afraid to leave her alone with me for five minutes?"

"No, you great oaf! But where is she?"

"Where do you think? In the Ladies powdering her nose, and . . ." Tom's bold eyes stared at him. "And straightening her lips. Get her a programme while you're waiting." He consulted the card which hung at his cuff, its silk cord entangled in the blonde hairs of his wrist. "And, before you pinch all her dances, keep me No. 11. It's a Viennese waltz and just my line of country."

"All right." Peter fetched the programmes. He watched Tom usher some new-comers up the steps. As Tom rejoined a glanced towards the Ladies. "Wonder what's --?"

do you think? Give the girl a chance. You know enough not to rush your fences." Tom

watched a big car approach. "By-the-by, Peter, what's this I hear about one of your ships?"

"About what?" Peter was not listening.

"About one of your Customs cruisers."

"About what, Tom!" Peter was listening now.

"About one of your ships, old man."

"What about her?"

"That she'd been shelled by a Jap destroyer. Some dim individual from Taipo said the rumour was flying round there before he left."

"Christ! Did he know where—or what ship?"

"I don't think he knew where, but he did know the ship's name. What the devil was it?" Tom fingered his moustache. "What's the name of your flagship?"

"The *Ch'ap'ing*."

"That's it. The *Ch'ap'ing*."

"But, Tom, it can't be true! It must be a rumour. The *Ch'ap'ing*'s anchored in Kowloon Bay with the other Customs cruisers. They've been there ever since the Jap blockade began."

"You're probably right. The chap was pretty dim. I didn't even know his name."

Tom was busy again with a fat taipan and his not-so-fat wife. The wife smiled girlishly. She would have bartered a year with her husband for one night with the Governor's handsome A.D.C. Tom watched her as far as the Ladies.

"As a matter of interest, are any of your ships where a Jap destroyer could get at 'em?"

"One of them is, but she's nothing like the *Ch'ap'ing*—not half her size for one thing." If the mistake in name had given Peter any confidence, it was oozing away.

"Well, I shouldn't worry. And if anything has happened, don't forget my system—sit tight for three weeks. I've never known it fail." Tom went forward to welcome the Colonial Secretary and Mary ffenel-Jones.

Peter watched Mary fasten her saucery blue eyes on Tom's stiff moustache. He wondered whether Tom's system would help Mary, if her father had not taught her to help herself.

"There!" Primrose slipped an arm through his. "I leave you alone for two minutes, and when I come back, I find you ogling poor Mary. Can't you leave her to Tom? She'll need all her wits about her to manage that one." She turned him round. "Let's get this being announced business over. I want to dance."

His head bent, he dropped into step beside her.

She was quick to catch his mood.

"What is it, pet? You know I was only teasing."

"Of course, darling." He patted the slim fingers on his sleeve. "I wasn't even listening."

"Peter, how rude!"

"I suppose it was." He sighed. "But Tom's been hearing rumours."

"Tom's as bad as a woman."

"No, pet. Tom may be bad medicine for the Marys of life, but under the huntin', fishin' and shootin' disguise, Tom's no fool. He wouldn't stay A.D.C. to this Governor if he was."

"What's he been hearing?"

"That the ship we sent to Bias Bay—he has the name wrong, but that means nothing—has been shelled by the Japs."

"Oh Peter!" Her fingers tightened on his arm. "Might it mean war?"

"Good God, no, darling!" He laughed through his anxiety. "It might mean the sack for me, and for poor old Mordent, but not war. The lion's tail will take another twist or two before the Japs learn that it is a lion, even if a bit old and tired and moth-eaten."

"Let's find Christopher." She pulled him out of the line of people making their slow way towards the ballroom. "I know a way through one of the side rooms. We can say how d'y'do to Sir William and Lady Turpin afterwards."

They went down a corridor towards a high thin door. As they reached it, someone called:

"Peter!"

Peter looked back. It was Tom Backhouse.

"I thought I'd catch up with you." Tom frowned at Primrose. "But I didn't think I'd catch you ditching your social obligations."

"What is it, Tom?"

"It's the telephone, old man. It sounded urgent, so I put it through to my employer's study—two doors down on the left."

"Thanks, Tom." Peter turned to Primrose. "Wait here for me, pet."

"I want to come with you. I know the way."

"All right." He held out his hand. "Show me." The carpet lay in front of them like a path. Peter wondered

what was at the end of it. Primrose's hand in his was comforting and cool.

She stopped in front of a door. He opened it and fumbled for the light. They were in a study. A telephone stood on a desk by the french window. Primrose sat on the desk. He picked up the receiver.

"Yule here."

"It's Mordent."

"Mordent!" Peter stared at Primrose. "What's the trouble?"

"Captain Sloane and his first officer, Mr. Reese, are here in my bungalow. The Japs have shelled the *Ch'ap'ing* and driven her ashore. She's aground this side of Mirs Point. . ."

"The *Ch'ap'ing*! What in the name of God was she doing. . .?"

"Hold on a minute. . ." Someone at the other end had interrupted.

Peter covered the mouthpiece and repeated what Mordent had said. Then he waited, the far hum of a live telephone in his ear.

"No, I'm sorry, Yule. I had the story wrong. After Sloane had put the *Ch'ap'ing* ashore, the Jap destroyer came close in and towed her off."

"Towed her off! The *Ch'ap'ing* . . .!"

"Sloane saw that from the hillside where he was hiding."

"But the *Ch'ap'ing*, Mordent! What in the name of Heaven was the. . ."

"I know, Yule, I know. But don't waste time on that. It can be explained—unfortunately for us." He paused. "I want you to find the Commissioner, if you will, and tell him. . ."

"I'll do that—right away. Then I'll come to you."

"Would you? I wish you would." Mordent's voice dropped. "Sloane maintains he followed his instructions to the letter."

"But, damn it, Mordent, he took the *Ch'ap'ing*!"

"It's no good, Yule. I told you that can be explained."

"I see." Peter looked at Primrose and bit his lip. Her eyes were wide open and there were no chestnut flecks in them. But they were steady and unafraid. He squeezed her hand. "Anyway, Mordent, keep your heart up. There must be a way out of this."

"I know. The boats home are still running."

"Don't talk like that." He paused. "All right, I'll

tell the Commissioner and I'll be with you in half an hour." He put down the receiver.

"How bad is it?" Primrose stood close to him.

"Pretty bad. The Japs have the *Ch'ap'ing*. They towed her off this side of Mirs Point."

"But that's British waters!" Her chin came out.

"I know, pet, I know—much good that will do Mordent or me."

"But they can't blame you if the Japs violate British waters."

"Darling, Old Andy will ask just one question: 'What the hell was my flagship doing off Mirs Point?' If we say we sent her there, to improve junk control, he'll say: 'I told you to improve junk control by enforcing the rules and regulations as they stand. I did not tell you to go risking my ships.' We haven't a leg to stand on. Or, at any rate, we haven't an argument Old Andy will listen to."

"I see." There was a suspicion of tears in her voice.

"Peter, let's find Christopher. Maybe he..."

"All right, Pet. Anyway he'll be with Archy and I must see the Commissioner. After I've seen him, I'll get along to Mordent's."

Primrose kissed him.

"I'll be here when you come back."

"You're everything I want in a wife." He opened the door. "Come on, let's face the music."

In the big ballroom a dance had just finished. People were streaming through the french windows into the garden. Sir Christopher and the Commissioner were by themselves near an empty fireplace.

Peter and Primrose crossed the floor.

"Hullo, you two." Sir Christopher took his daughter's hand. "I was afraid Peter would keep you to himself all evening. Not that I'd blame him if he did."

Across the room the tall figure of The Tribe detached itself from the crowd and came towards them. Esther was with him.

"Christopher," Primrose's eyes were as grey as her mother's. "Peter has something to tell his Commissioner."

"Oh!" Sir Christopher turned to Peter. "Do we leave you alone?"

"No sir, please not. You'll have to hear it too."

"What's all this, Peter?" Archy's face was pink and his eyes looked everywhere and nowhere.

The Tribe stopped nearby. Esther hesitated and he detained her by one bare elbow. The crowd poured out of the windows, taking their party chatter with them. The ballroom was empty, except for the group of people by the fireplace and the couple looking on.

Archy grew impatient.

"Come on, man, out with it." There was bluster in his voice and nothing else.

"A Japanese destroyer has shelled the *Ch'ap'ing*. Captain Sloane beached her this side of Mirs Point. The Jap came close in and towed her away." Without looking, Peter knew The Tribe was pulling his big nose, his eyes bright and listening.

"Towed her away!" Archy's mouth opened. "D'ye hear that, Sir Christopher? Towed her away! Off Mirs point! Out of British waters!" He gazed round, the white man's burden suddenly too much for him. "I cannot deal with this. It's beyond my competence—out of my sphere. It's a matter for the Colonial Office—for the House of Commons. I must see Sir William at once."

Sir Christopher listened, but he looked at his daughter. If all this was true, she would need courage. He thought of her mother. She would have plenty.

"Of course, Gordon, you must move in the matter at once. I'll come with you."

As casually as he could, Peter turned his head. The Tribe was standing a little apart, watching. When a snake strikes, he withdraws himself to watch and wait for the poison to work.

Peter spoke to the Commissioner.

"I think, sir, if you approve, I'll go to Mordent's bungalow and get the whole story. I can be back in an hour."

"As you like. I'll be with the Governor. Report to me there. No doubt Sir William will want details, but we have the essential fact—a foreign power has been guilty of a gross violation of British waters."

Peter wondered if anything would make Archy face the fact that mattered to them.

"You realise, sir, that Sloane used the *Ch'ap'ing*, our biggest ship, the I.G.'s. . . ."

"Yes, yes, Peter, I realise that. But it's entirely beside the point. No one cares what ship it was. It's the violation of British territorial waters that matters." Archy had dropped the role of Commissioner of Chinese Maritime

Customs. It no longer suited him. And he had forgotten Old Andy. Old Andy would care what ship it was. He would never forgive the loss of his flagship.

"Then, sir, I'll get along."

"Yes, yes, Peter. Anything you like."

Primrose looked at her father.

"I'll wait outside till Peter gets back."

Tom Backhouse was at the entrance.

"I listened on the extension, old man. Hope you don't mind."

"Of course not, Tom. You had to know."

Tom walked down the steps.

"Your car's hemmed in. Your only way out is across the lawn. I'll explain to my employer in the morning. He'll be too busy to listen."

"Thanks, Tom. Look after Primrose." Peter kissed her cheek and ran across the drive to his car.

As he drove over the lawn someone shouted, but he paid no attention. He took the mid-level road to Pokfulam and he tried not to think. He must hear the facts first.

There was a light in Mordent's bungalow. Peter ran up the steps and through the open door. Mordent met him in the hall and they went into the dining-room together. Sloane and Reese were seated on either side of the table. Sloane turned his head, but Reese continued to stare at the *Ch'ap'ing's* log which lay open in front of him.

"Get yourself a chair, Yule." Mordent sat down at the head of the table. "And now, Captain Sloane, will you repeat the story you have already told me to the Preventive Deputy."

Sloane sighed audibly.

"Is there any need? I have nothing to change or to add to what..."

"Mister Sloane!" This was Mordent of the Merchant Navy. "I am Southern Commander—till someone replaces me. You will repeat your story word for word. That is an order."

In the silence that followed Peter found himself a chair. He was glad Mordent was showing fight. If they were they might as well go down with flags flying.

His fingers drummed on the table. When he spoke, his was a bored monotone.

And in Mirs Bay till the edge of dark. At 18.00 proceeded. At 18.30 Mirs Point bore nor'

nor' east, distant about two miles. I was flying no flag and making no smoke. However, the Jap destroyer saw me. I can't say I was surprised."

"The Deputy is not interested in whether you were surprised or not, Mister Sloane. Neither am I. Go on."

Sloane looked across the table at his first officer and shrugged his shoulders.

"The destroyer closed rapidly and began to signal with a lamp. I was busy on the bridge, and, before the signal could be brought to me, the Jap opened fire. In an effort to save my ship, I turned away. I was now steering due north, Mirs Point a little east of north, distant one mile. Jap shells fell in my wake and one passed overhead and burst on the hillside. To save my officers and crew, I put my ship ashore on a sandy beach just west of Mirs Point. Mr. Reese secured the log and code books. As we abandoned ship, the Jap ceased fire, but he continued to close rapidly. Mr. Reese and myself were last over the side."

"How did you get ashore?" Peter asked the question for the sake of saying something.

"Waded in. The beach is steep to, and the bows were in shallow water."

"What happened then?"

"We hid on the side of a hill and watched the Jap come close in and take the *Ch'ap'ing* in tow. It was now quite dark. Mr. Reese and I made our way to a nearby village, hired a sampan and set off in the direction of Sha-u-chung. Mr. Reese had a torch and he signalled intermittently. The *Fuments'ai* saw our signals—Mr. Skate had heard firing and was on patrol. He picked us up and took us to Taipo. From there, we made our way in to report. The *Fuments'ai* has gone back for the rest of my officers and crew." Sloane looked across the table. "Mr. Reese, show the Deputy my log."

Reese pushed the log down the table. Peter glanced at it. Opposite 18.00 was:

"Weighed and proceed: flying no flag." From there the entries corroborated Sloane's story. They were laconic even for a log.

Peter looked up.

"We know, do we, why the *Ch'ap'ing* was used?"

Mordent turned to Sloane.

"Explain that too, Mr. Sloane."

Sloane did so. It was clear that he had misled the

Commissioner. But who could prove it? Sloane had been clever. He had a cut and dried case and knew it and it showed in his voice.

The *Ch'ap'ing* had been risked and she had been lost. That was all Old Andy would want to know. He would listen to no explanation and to nobody. Unless The Tribe undertook to explain. Peter saw a pair of bright hard eyes and one raised eyebrow. Might as well ask a snake to help a rabbit.

"Well, Yule, that seems to be all." Mordent's voice was flat.

"There is one more thing, Mordent. Even a Jap destroyer won't go towing the *Ch'ap'ing* round for ever."

"That's true."

"What do you think he'll do with her? What do you think he wanted with her in the first place?"

"God knows! I don't suppose he knew himself. Her charts, perhaps."

"Well, what do you think he'll do with her?"

"Use her as a target, probably."

"I expect you're right."

"Maybe I am." Mordent pushed back his chair. "But no one can tell what a Jap will do, because, half the time, he doesn't know himself. Once he's looted her, he's just as likely to set her adrift."

Sloane lifted his head and Reese shifted in his chair uneasily.

Peter waited, but neither of them spoke. He stood up.

"Well, I suppose I'd better get back and report to the old man. Good-night, Captain Sloane. Good-night, Mr. Reese."

"G'night, sir." Reese answered with his head bent.

If Sloane answered, Peter did not hear him.

Mordent followed Peter to the hall.

"That's the story as Sloane told it to me. It agrees with the log and you can bet your life Mr. Reese will tell the same story at the Court of Inquiry."

They went down the steps. Peter sat into the driver's seat.

"Anyway, I'm glad you called Sloane to order."

"It wasn't the first time. I don't trust Sloane and I never have."

"I don't trust him! My God, I wish I'd known that."

"That he was your right-hand man."

"Who gave you that idea. All Sloane cares my job."

"I see. So he and Reese stand to gain by this?"

"Of course. Not that it's any help knowing that."

"No, but it might be. If we could prove their story's false, or, better still, that they did something they were told not to."

"Suppose they did? How're we going to find out?"

"I don't know." Peter started the car. "It isn't going to be easy."

"And even if we do find out, what's the good? So long as Sloane and Reese hang together—and it's plain they mean to—they won't hang separately."

"And by this time tomorrow the Japs will have sunk whatever evidence there may be."

"I expect so."

"Well..." Peter let in the clutch. "I'll telephone if anything turns up. Meantime, keep your heart up. Maybe we'll find a way out."

"Maybe, but I doubt it. Thanks all the same for coming."

"Good-night, Mordent."

"Good-night, Yule."

Watching his headlights on the road, Peter thought over Sloane's story from the beginning. Mordent was right. If the Court of Inquiry accepted it—and why should they not?—Mordent and he could book their passages home.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ALL Sunday, till late in the afternoon, the South-West monsoon held. Then the wind dropped and fog came down and hid The Peak under a grey blanket that isolated each house in a soundless world of its own. By evening it was swirling in untidy streamers through Magazine Gap, blurring the road lamps and blotting out the harbour. The damp seeped in through the windows and under the verandah door. Te lit a fire to keep it out of the sitting-room.

In the dining-room Peter watched Primrose peel and eat a lichee.

"Shall we have coffee in the sitting-room when you've finished?"

"Yes, let's." She dabbled her fingers in a lacquer bowl.

He pulled back her chair and followed her through the folding doors. She settled herself in an arm-chair by the fire.

"All the same, Peter, I don't see why you're so sure this means such serious trouble for you. All Archy seemed worried about last night were the international complications."

"That was last night. He's been brought back to earth today."

"By what?"

"Three telegrams from Shanghai, each one more difficult to answer than the last. The last he hasn't answered at all—because he can't." Peter stared into the fire. "But his mind will have cleared by tomorrow—if you can talk of Archy's mind clearing. By tomorrow, he'll realise that what he needs is a scapegoat. I'm it—and poor old Mordent." Peter stirred the fire with his foot. "I'm sorry for Mordent. It's taken him a lifetime to get where he is. He's ill and he has a wife at home."

Primose patted the arm of her chair on the side away from the fire and Peter sat down.

"I'm glad you think of Commander Mordent when it looks so black for you, but you're doing the right thing over the junks. Won't that help?"

"Fraid not, pet." He stroked her hair. It was soft and shone in the firelight. "Old Andy has probably guessed that I'm trying to get my way by a trick. He's no fool, Old Andy. There never has been a fool at the head of the Customs. Most of them, like Sir Robert Hart, have been hard-headed men from the North of Ireland. Andy won't be impressed by my tactics, but he is impressed by the loss of his flagship."

"You don't think he'll let you off with a transfer to some outlandish place—like Tengyueh?" She looked up. "I wouldn't mind that, if . . ."

"No, pet, I don't." He paused. "I'm afraid, unless something unforeseen happens, Mordent is right and we may as well book our passages home. I shan't like saying good-bye to China." He watched her fine hands clasping and unclasping in her lap. "But I'm not worrying about myself, or, anyway, I'm trying not to. I'm young. I can start again. But there's Mordent—and there's you."

"Me?" She looked up again, her eyes grey and wet. "What about me, Peter?"

"I don't want to lose you."

"I told you last night that nothing would make any difference."

"But, pet, I'll be penniless."

"Peter!" Her eyes changed. There were chestnut flecks in them again and the firelight caught a ghost of a smile at the corners of her mouth. "Girls should be warned against creatures like you. What's being penniless got to do with jilting me?"

"Darling, I'm not jilting you. I'm explaining."

"Are you?" She sat round and put her hand on his knee. "Then explain more. Explain everything. It's high time."

"High time?"

"Yes, Peter, high time. I've waited long enough."

"Long enough, pet? I don't think I understand."

"Oh yes you do, Peter. And I don't mean just about the junks and the *Ch'ap'ing* either."

"I see." He heard the clock on the mantelpiece tick. Chuang's crab, squatting on its blackwood stand, peered down at him. "I understand." He drew breath like a man on the brink of a pool who knows the water is cold and deep. "All right then. This morning I had a letter from Jo. He's arriving tomorrow afternoon. But, before he sees Esther, he's going to see Messrs Spink, Thacker and Spink."

"Esther told me that much."

"Did she? Did she tell you anything more?"

"Try and see."

"It's not much of a story."

"I can stand it—if you tell me." She took his hand.

"But only if you tell me."

"I'll try." He looked into the fire. "Wuchow was pretty lonely. There wasn't enough to keep me out of mischief. Esther is a very attractive woman, and she lets you see it at every turn."

"Peter!" There was an imp of laughter in her eyes. "You are a scamp! The woman tempted me. Besides, it's not even true."

"Not true?" He looked at her in surprise. "Of course it's true. Ask any man. Esther's temptation on two legs."

"I didn't mean that." Her laughter bubbled to the surface. "I meant you pretending the affair began in Wuchow. That isn't true. It began long before—at the Bachelors' ball maybe. Maybe even before that."

He looked at her for a long time and then he shook his head.

"I don't understand you. If you knew so long ago—and cared for me so long ago. . . . You did, didn't you?"

"Yes, Peter. Did and do."

"Well then—why were you so friendly with Esther in Wuchow? I remember wondering about it at the time, perhaps because I'd been afraid you two mightn't hit it off. But you were with her all the time."

"Of course I was with her all the time. I wanted to keep an eye on you." She smiled at him. "And I wanted to pick up a few tips. Afterwards I grew to like her for herself."

"You're a queer one." He looked at her upturned face. "I know now why you have a pointed nose and ears like a pixie."

"I'm not queer. I'm a normal woman, except maybe that I admit it. I meant to learn how to get you and keep you. I hope I have."

"That doesn't sound as if you were giving me up."

"Of course I'm not giving you up. Why should I? Just because . . ."

"Just because Jo is naming me co-respondent in his divorce and because I'm guilty."

"Oh Peter!" She bent and kissed his fingers. "I'm so glad you said it."

"Don't do that!" He snatched his hand away. "You make me ashamed."

"Do I, Peter? I don't mean to. I don't want you to be." He shook his head.

"I don't understand you. Don't you mind about Esther? Don't you mind about her and about. . . ." He stammered unhappily.

"If you mean don't I mind about Esther and about all the others that have gone before?" She smiled at his protesting face. "Of course I mind. I wish—deeply sometimes—that you were a virgin like me, but that wouldn't do either, though I'm not sure why. Maybe in a younger world. . . ." She stretched out her hands to the fire. "But our world is old and soiled. I want you as a husband, but I want you as my lover as well." She turned her head. "So cheer up, Peter, you still have me and you're still winning your junk war, whatever old Andy thinks."

He slipped into the chair and took her on his knee.

"If I have you, I can manage somehow. Though, God knows what we'll use for money."

She leant against his shoulder. His arms round her comforted them both.

There was a knock at the door. She glanced at it and at the same time the door was repeated, louder this time.

Peter sat up.

"Who's that?"

"*Tung chia*...."

"Oh, it's only Te. *Chin lai, Te, chin lai.*"

The door opened and Te inserted himself.

"He is well trained, isn't he?" Primrose cuddled into Peter's lap. "You'd think it was a bedroom."

"Ssh, pet! *Shem ma shih ch'ing, Te?*"

Out of deference to Missy, and to show he could speak a barbarian tongue if he had to, Te answered in pidgin.

"Outside have got t'ree men, please ask see Master."

"What sort of men?"

"Chinese men. Talkee very important business. Say, must be *fu shui wu ssu*. Must see."

"What is all this? Here, pet, let me up." Peter scrambled to his feet. "Where are they, Te?"

"*Wai p'erh—hou p'erh.*" Te lapsed into broad Pekinese.

Peter followed him into the hall and sat down on the teak and camphorwood chest. He looked back at Primrose standing in the doorway.

"Come and sit here. Te has gone for our visitors."

Te came back with three barefoot Chinese. In the hall-light their coolie cloth jackets glistened black and wet. The tallest of them took off his round cap and rubbed the stubble of his scalp. Sweat made his head itch.

The shortest, who had come in last, gazed at the telephone, while his feet investigated the parquet floor. They were triangular feet—the big toes so divided from the others they lived a life of their own—but they felt at home on this floor. It was not so different from a deck, soaked in wood oil, washed smooth and clean by green seas. His trousers hung about his ankles, creased where they had been rolled above his knees and the wet in the creases was salt water wetness. Fog would not have soaked in so deep. His face, like his companions', was broad and strong, but it was lined with fatigue. Ho Ma Ch'un was done. Not that it mattered. It was Hop Li's turn to speak.

Ho blew through his hare-lip and grinned. He was glad of that. Fourteen hours previously he had spoken at length, and that was not natural in him, nor seemly in one who was only a wife's first cousin. His big toes felt the floor and to them it was the smooth deck of Hop Li's junk and they were in Pinghoi again, and it was two hours after dawn....

Hop Li sat on his heels fanning a charcoal chatty with a

broken paper fan. The red heart glowed and faded, and, when he paused, the breeze from across the sandspit, blew it red again. In the shelter where they were, the wind was fitful, but off Fokhai point the South-West monsoon was steady and strong. With it behind them they could be up the coast and into Swabue with their cargoes of soft coal long before sunset. But the wind would not hold for ever. Anyone could tell that. If they were to make Swabue, they must sail at once.

If they were to go back, then they must beat their way back through the pass and only one junk would go. It would be folly to risk all three. The one to go would be Ho Ma Ch'un's. It was a pirate junk from Pinghoi, and pirate junks were better on the wind than the big traders from Swabue.

Hop Li fanned and looked across the chatty at the others. He wanted to know what would happen to the coal in the two junks they left behind. What would happen to the junks themselves? Perhaps what would have happened to the steamer that lay beached on the other side of the sandspit, if wife's first cousin Ho had not gone ashore and seen his Pinghoi kinsfolk? Hop Li could see her funnel and superstructure as he fanned, the steamer that was the cause of all the trouble.

Ho Ma Ch'un sympathized with elder brother—and with himself. It had not been easy to speak to kinsfolk he had not seen for so long, kinsfolk he had hoped never to see again. They had laughed at him, coming ashore from a Swabue trader, his own good pirate junk anchored astern of her like a dog.

They asked him where was the Swabue woman he had married, and how he liked living in her village, and engaging in trade with those distant cousins of his—when he might have been making an honourable living, like his ancestors, as a pirate. Still, no one had ever expected much from old Goat Mouth. Two of them imitated his misshapen speech. Ho had smiled and smiled, and repeated his request. In the end, though they laughed a lot, they promised a little.

They would not loot this steamer of his—not yet anyway. She could lie where she was for a night and a day. Then, if his great and powerful friends in the Customs—Shades of his Ancestors! A Pinghoi man with friends in the Customs!—had not come for her, there would be a little looting, *shao shao ti*—a very little. They laughed merrily over the *shao shao ti*. Only a very little. They would leave the big

chimney and the paint. That much they would do for Goat Mouth. But for his Swabue relatives—they scowled at the two fat traders anchored ahead of the slim Pinghoi pirate—for them, they would do nothing at all.

Hop Li put two more sticks of charcoal on the chatty and fanned gently. The wind did it better. But fanning helped him to think.

"By evening we can be in Swabue. Can we not tell our news to the *hai kuan jen* there, Li The Little One? Can he not go by bus to Hongkong—as, at his bidding, we went by bus—and tell the *fu shui wu ssu*. He is a Customs man. They will listen to him." He glanced at the ramshackle huts along the beach. "But if we leave our good Swabue junks here, who knows what will happen to them? If we go back—?" He looked beyond the sandspit and the beached steamer to the high outline of Samun. "If we go back, we must go back in daylight. It will be too late if we wait till nightfall. Besides" He sniffed the breeze. "Besides, by tonight, this wind will drop." He stopped fanning. "Daylight in T'uniang Pass! Have we not done enough? Have they not promised that the steamer will not be looted?" He stared at the line of slim junks drawn up at the water's edge. "Not yet anyway." The fan drooped. Hop Li waited for a reply.

Ho Ma Ch'un did not answer. He looked at Hop Lo Hon sitting on his heels by the mast. Second brother would not cast his vote either way, but it was his turn to speak. The uses of ceremony required it.

"It is risky to go back." Hop Lo Hon looked at neither of them. "The monkey men are great fools, but even they may wonder at a Pinghoi junk in daylight in the pass. It is many moons since they have seen that. But, if we go to Swabue, our news may be too late."

Ho Ma Ch'un blew through his lip. It had been bad to hear again the ragged children shout 'Goat Mouth!' 'Goat Mouth!' Almost he had forgotten the name that had driven him from his native village. It would be a great dishonour if the men who had taken him in lost their junks through him. But there was a dishonour greater than that.

"Hop Li, every junkman knows that when the *fu shui wu ssu* saved our junks, you, Elder Brother, said before all men in the Lok T'ien eating house, that he was our mother and father."

"It is so." The fan hung down, the gnarled fingers half-open as if they had forgotten they held anything so trivial.

"You know, inside his heart is good towards the junk people. If we do not help him now, they will send him away and he will not be here to help us any more."

"It is as you say."

"Reverent and Elder Brother." Ho Ma Ch'un cleared his throat. "We waste time." He spat into the little waves that slap-slapped against the side of the junk. "Good sons help their parents. The rules of ceremony require it. There is no other way." He stood up. "I shall take half the coal out of my junk. She will sail better so, and perhaps half will be enough for...for...?" Embarrassment made his clumsy speech clumsier. "For my kinsfolk ashore, who do not use much coal."

Unloading had been back-breaking work. Then, alone on deck, he had sailed his junk through the pass. He had gone close to the monkey men's war vessel—it was the only way—but, though his scalp crept—nothing happened. All the same it had not been easy. It was thirty-six hours since he had slept. He looked at the telephone. Now it was all right. There was electric speech in this house. Once elder brother had told the *fu shui wu ssu* their news, the *ta jen* would call someone by means of the electric speech and they could go home. Back on his junk, he would sleep and perhaps for many days he need not speak again.

Primrose did not need Peter's grip on her fingers to tell her there was something unusual about these barefoot men. But no one said anything. Peter stood up and she plucked at his jacket. He took her hand again without looking round.

"Why are they here, Te? What do they want? Can you understand what they say?"

Te was a Chinese and used to multiple questions. He answered the one that mattered first.

"Understand a little—maybe seven parts in ten."

"All right. Ask them what they want?"

Peter could catch a word here and there. One word was repeated again and again.

"What ship, Te? What ship is he talking about?"

"Master, the Customs ship. The ship the Japanese war vessel took."

"For God's sake, Te, what about her?"

Te spoke again to Hop Li.

"Master, they say Customs ship is on a sandspit by Pinghoi. They say so far all right, but Master must tow away soon."

Must tow away quick. In Pinghoi. . . " Te stopped. " Some very bad trouble in Pinghoi."

" You're damn right there is some bad trouble in Pinghoi—two-legged trouble." Peter moved towards the telephone. " I'll hurry. Of course, I'll hurry. But it'll be too late."

" Not too late if quickly." Te glanced at Ho Ma Ch'un. " This shortest one has made agreement."

" Shortest one ? "

Te fingered his lip.

" Oh, I see. What sort of agreement, Te ? "

" Master, no trouble before sunset tomorrow."

" Of course, he's a Pinghoi man. Maybe they would listen to one of their own." He smiled at Ho. " Ho Ma Ch'un is it not ? "

Ho looked away from the telephone and grinned. He was gratified. The *fu shui wu ssu* was a *ta jen*, but he knew the uses of courtesy and used the name of even a humble one in full.

" Very decent of *Ho hsien sheng*, I'm sure." Peter paused half-way across the hall. " In fact it's very decent of all of them to come up here at night and in all this fog, and I'm grateful." He looked at Primrose. " But, pet, I don't see why they did it, and I don't see how they know it's the *Ch'ap'ing*. God knows I hope it is, but it's a pretty faint hope. If it was the old *Hoilung-ah* now—every junkmaster from Pakhoi to Amoy knows her—but the *Ch'ap'ing*? She's new and most of her time she's been in North China waters. The more I think of it, the odder it is." He looked at Te. " Te, ask them how they know it's the Customs ship ? "

" Very easy, Master. They see Customs banner."

" They did not see a Customs flag Te, for the very good reason that there isn't one. Don't answer for them. Ask them. . . ? "

" Yes, Master, Customs banner. . . "

" Te, will you do as I say."

" Master, already have asked. Already they say banner—very big banner. . . "

" A flag ! " Peter's eyes bulged. " A very big flag ! They've said so already ? Here. . . ! " He pushed past Ho Ma Ch'un. " Let me at that telephone." He dialled a number with a quick nervous finger. At the other end the telephone rang and rang again. He glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was barely ten. Mordent could not be in bed, yet. The receiver at the other end was lifted and a tired voice said :

"Yes. Who is it?"

"Mordent, it's me—Yule."

"Yes, Yule, what is it?"

"Mordent. . . ." Peter's face was crimson and his voice shook. "I know where she is. She's ashore on the sandspit this side of Pinghoi."

"How do you know? Pinghoi? By God, we must get there fast."

"It's all right. I have a Pinghoi man here. There's to be no monkey business before tomorrow night."

"But how did a Pinghoi man recognize the *Ch'ap'ing*?"

"Because she's flying a flag!"

"She's doing what!"

"Flying a flag, the biggest bloodiest flag in all her locker. He did it on purpose. He wanted the Jap to see. He wanted to lose his ship, the dirty. . . .!" Peter saw Primrose's knuckles whiten over the edge of the chest.

"Can we prove it?"

"Why not? The flag's still there." Peter was calmer now. "But we ought to get her at once."

"We'll get her—The Kowloon Dock people will let me have the *Henry Keswick* for this—and, by God, we'll get him." There was no fatigue in Mordent's voice now. "Does anyone know where Mister Sloane is?"

"I hoped you would."

"I ought to. Let's see. It's Sunday night." He paused. "Of course I know. He's on the hotel roof having Chinese chow with that wife of his and Reese. They'll be celebrating—celebrating in advance." Mordent drew breath. "I'll give them something to celebrate."

"Can you get him?"

"Can I get him?" Mordent snorted. "Of course I can get him, and Reese too, if he's sober."

"Reese doesn't matter. It's Sloane we want."

"All right. I'll get him. And, when I do, what do I do with him—besides tearing him apart?"

"Bring him here. But no tearing apart, Mordent, please! I know how you feel. I felt like that too at first. But we've got to keep cool. All we want from him is a confession, and we'll want a third person to hear it." Peter paused. "Mordent, when you bring Sloane up here, we'll go into the dining-room, just as we did at your house when he had the whip hand. Primrose Gartrell is here. She'll hear everything through the folding doors."

"I'll be with you in half an hour with Sloane, dead or alive."

"Alive, Mordent, please!"

"All right." The tension in Mordent's voice eased. "I see your point. He'll be alive."

Peter walked to the chest.

"You'll do that for us, Primrose?" He held out his hand.

"Of course."

"Come and wait in the sitting-room." He turned to Te.

"Take them into the kitchen and give them tea. Ask them please to wait."

In the sitting-room Primrose curled up on his knee. She looked into the fire, watching the flames and saying little.

Just after half past ten, a car drove up to the house. Te opened the front door, and, as Peter crossed the sitting-room, they heard Sloane's voice in the hall, ill-tempered and thick.

"Where's the sense in dragging me up here at this time of night and in all this bloody fog? Why can't he wait till morning?"

As Mordent dropped his hat on the chest, Peter came out of the sitting-room.

"Hullo, Mordent. Good evening, Captain Sloane." Peter held the dining-room door open. "Let's go in here."

Mordent sat at the foot of the table. Peter stood with his back to the serving hatch. Sloane pulled out a chair and sat sideways on it. His jacket was buttoned and he held his hat by the brim, turning it round and round. He was nervous and a little drunk.

"Well, now I'm here, what do you two want with me?"

"We have some news for you, Captain Sloane." Peter looked at Mordent. "By the way, what about Mr. Reese?"

"Too drunk to come."

"Too bad. However, it doesn't matter." Peter pushed back the serving hatch and spoke to Te. The door to the kitchen opened and Hop Li, Hop Lo Hon and Ho Ma Ch'un came in. "Captain Sloane, these three men are junk-masters—old friends of mine. They have some news you will be interested to hear."

"Shall I?"

"One of them—the one with the disfigured lip—is Ho Ma Ch'un." Peter smiled at Ho. "He comes from Pinghoi. Of course, you know Pinghoi. It's on the other side of Bias Bay, roughly twenty sea miles from Mirs Point. And that,

Captain Sloane—before the wind dropped this afternoon—was twenty sea miles to leeward of Mirs Point."

"What the hell has all this got to do with me?"

"It has a great deal to do with you. Ho Ma Ch'un and his companions have found the *Ch'ap'ing*."

"Found the *Ch'ap'ing*!" Sloane's fingers went to his tie. "How can they have found her? The Japs must have...."

"No—unfortunately for you—the Japs did not sink her. Apparently they set her adrift. In any event she's ashore now on the sandspit this side of Pinghoi."

"I don't believe a word of it. How do they know it's the *Ch'ap'ing*?"

"Just what Commander Mordent asked. They recognized her as a Customs vessel, Captain Sloane, because she was flying, and still is flying, a Customs flag—the biggest flag, I fancy, you—or was it Mr. Reese?—could find in her locker."

"It's a lie. It's a damned dirty Chinese lie."

"Oh no it isn't, Captain Sloane, and I think we can prove it all right. We'll have her towed in first thing tomorrow morning. The Kowloon Dock people will let us have the *Henry Keswick* for that. The *Henry Keswick* will fly the red ensign and, with that as protection, we'll risk further attention from the Jap and leave the Customs flag where it is—where, Captain Sloane, you put it."

"I did not. I flew no flag. It's in my log. Mr. Reese will swear to it."

"I've no doubt he will—when he's sober. He probably stood to gain nearly as much by this as you did."

"It's a damned dirty lie." Sloane ran his finger round the inside of his collar. He undid his jacket, and, with one leg outstretched, groped in his trouser pocket for a handkerchief. Something on his waistcoat glinted green.

Peter bent forward to look, and Sloane leant back to see what had attracted the Deputy's attention. The light fell on his waistcoat. A green crab with flat oriental legs hung from his watch chain. He stared at it, his mouth open.

"By God!" Peter's eyes blazed. "You're in with him, too." He pointed at Sloane. "What else did Chuang give you for losing your ship, and—what's much more important—"

"You promised to do for him?"

As on his feet.

gone ashy pale. His hand shook as he wiped

"I don't know what you're talking about. This.... this...."

"Crab, Captain Sloane, crab. We've seen ones like it before."

".....was given to me this morning for.....because....."

"Why, Captain Sloane, why? What's Chuang giving you presents for, and why on Sunday? What's all the rush? Can't he wait till a week day? What have you done for him that he should give you anything at all?"

Sloane blew his nose and looked at the result.

"You can't help Chuang, can you? Not as captain of a Customs cruiser, you can't. Chuang buys the stuff you seize—when you seize anything—but he sees the Southern Commander about that. The Southern Commander, Captain Sloane—but not you. Not yet, anyway. I'd like an explanation and I'd like it now."

Sloane went on wiping his nose.

Mordent leant over the table.

"Stop snivelling, Mister Sloane, and answer the Deputy."

"I'm not snivelling, and don't you start bullying me. You know damn well I ought to have had your job long ago....."

"Say that again, Mister Sloane." Mordent came round the table. "Say that again and by Almighty God....."

"It's all right, Mordent." Peter stepped between them. "Leave him alone. The whole rotten business is clear enough. He flew a flag, hoping to lose his ship and get your job. We'll tow her back with the flag flying. Even without an admission from him, that should be enough. No Court of Inquiry will believe the Japs hoisted it—not after the history of the last twelve months." He looked at the crumpled figure in the chair. "You'd better go, Captain Sloane. The Commissioner will send for you when he wants you."

Sloane got to his feet. He picked up his hat and buttoned his jacket. At the door he turned.

"Go on. Get out. If Mordent sets about you, I shan't interfere again."

Sloane found nothing to say. He left the room. The front door slammed.

Peter leant against the sideboard. He felt flat and he was sweating.

Mordent went into the hall.

"Has he gone?" The folding doors opened and Primrose came in. "I heard everything, Peter. Will it be all right?"

Mordent looked into the room, his hat in his hand.

"Yes, Miss Gartrell, it will be all right provided we get to the *Ch'ap'ing* in time—and that's my job."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"HAVE some coffee?" The Tribe held up the pot.

Esther shook her head.

"I've eaten too much as it is." She sat back on the sofa.

"Besides, you should know by this time that I don't like coffee after tiffin." She looked round the first floor lounge of the Hongkong hotel. "What a morgue this place is on Monday afternoons."

"You certainly don't sound very cheerful."

"Should I?"

"Why shouldn't you?" The Tribe filled his own cup.

"After all, you're like me, you enjoy plot and counter-plot." He clasped a bony knee between his fingers. "Here you have the perfect example."

"Where? I don't see it."

"You mean you don't want to see it. Let me explain."

"Nothing will stop you."

"How right you are." He rocked back on his tail. "Let us recall the position last week. Peter was winning his junk war by giving the Inspectorate exactly what they asked for."

"That should have pleased them."

"On the contrary. Nothing is more disconcerting than being given what you ask for—especially when you are expecting the exact opposite. However, Peter was winning, and T. L.'s bus venture was in jeopardy—so what did I do?"

"Well, go on. What did you do? I'm not in the mood to behave like a Greek chorus."

"I saw to it that Peter got what he asked for—which wasn't what he wanted at all." His eyes were closer together than

any. But for his nose, he might have been a Cyclops.

"... as I knew he would, used the rope I gave him
himself from the highest available tree. Peter's
r as the Customs is concerned—dead as a door
he knows it or not."

"n't, he isn't the only one."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning Primrose. She dined with him last night, and when I spoke to her on the 'phone this morning, she didn't sound the least depressed—far from it."

"What of it?"

"Nothing, Tony, nothing that would interest you. She just shows no sign of giving him up."

"Why should she? It doesn't matter to us now whether she gives him up or not. The Customs will do that for her."

"You sound very sure."

"Of course I'm sure. After a morning of telegrams even Archy realises that what he needs is a scapegoat. But it won't be Archy. Even though he was mainly responsible for the loss of the *Ch'ap'ing*—egged on, of course, by me."

"You certainly are pleased with yourself."

"I suppose I am." He sipped his coffee. "A sign of youth as a rule, though I can't help feeling in my case it's justified by events."

"And I'm supposed to feel pleased too?"

"Why not?"

"Why not?" She sat round to face him. "Why not? Because, though you've conveniently forgotten it, Jo is divorcing me and naming Peter co-respondent. It was your idea to egg Jo on. And now look at the mess I'm in. Peter about to be jobless, and even if he keeps his job. . . ."

"He won't."

"I said—even if he keeps his job, no sign that he has any intention of marrying me."

"Call the divorce off."

"Don't talk like a fool. Jo has all the evidence he needs. I saw to that myself."

"So I understood." The Tribe stirred his coffee. "You saw to that yourself? I thought Jo found all the evidence he needed without your help—that is, without your intentional help."

"So he did. But you kept urging me to write to him, so, while I was about it, I gave him more."

"Did you?" His eyebrows arched. "Gilding the lily, weren't you?"

"Maybe I was. But it was a relief to get it off my chest."

"Well, it's no concern of mine."

"No? I wonder will you think so after you've seen Jo."

"Why not? After all, Jo could have divorced you years ago." The Tribe patted the top of his head. "To mention only one of many, I gave him cause enough myself."

"That's a pretty speech!"

"It has the merit of being the truth."

"It's in the worst possible taste."

"Oh for Heaven's sake, Esther, stop behaving like a betrayed female! You'll be all right."

"I know, Tony, I know. I just wondered if you did."

In the silence that followed, The Tribe finished his coffee. He put down his cup.

"You're right, Esther. This place is a bit of a morgue." He unhinged his long body. "Let's stroll round to Wan Hsing's and see the old crab. He'll know the latest bamboo wireless."

They left the hotel and crossed Queen's road. There were no customers in the shop. Men buy jewels before a weekend—not after it. A shop assistant, who was polishing anything within easy reach, turned his head. He recognized the tall foreigner with the big nose, and went on with his polishing.

At the back of the shop there was a curtain, and, behind it, a room with a square blackwood table and blackwood chairs against the walls. By a barred window stood an old-fashioned roll-top desk and a swivel chair. T. L. Chaung was seated in the chair, peering myopically at papers he was packing into a metal despatch box. He had just put a cheque book on top of the papers. The box was full. Most of the pigeon holes in the desk were empty. A safe on the floor beside the desk stood open, and on top of it was a lunch basket and two thermos flasks. The lunch basket was shut, but a corner of grease paper protruded under its lid. Chuang wore a suit of Shantung silk that made his broad back look broader than ever. His narwhal stick leant against the desk, ready to his hand.

"Good morning, T.L." The Tribe held the curtain aside. "You busy?"

"Come in, Mister Tribe, come in." T.L. swung round in his chair. "Not too busy to see my friend." He heaved himself out of the chair and crossed the room. "*Chin lai, van Loon, t'ai t'ai, chin lai.*" He took Esther's hand in his soft dry flipper and drew her in. He put his head round the curtain. "*Foki, ch'a, fy ti ah!*"

T. L. waddled to his chair. One flat hand moved the metal box to the side, but not out of the way. He sat down to wait for tea and for someone to tell him the reason for this visit. The Tribe had a reason for everything he did. Also, Chuang had been caught with his hand exposed. He would wait for someone else to make the next move.

The Tribe sat down on a blackwood chair and tucked his long legs out of the way. He had seen everything there was to be seen; the emptied desk and the open safe; the stick by T.L.'s hand, the better-than-usual suit and the grease paper—especially the grease paper. The lunch basket was full. So, almost certainly, were the two thermos flasks. T.L. was going away.

Esther propped herself on the table, one leg outstretched. The table was high and the top of her stocking showed. The two men looked at her stocking and Esther looked at them. In them East and West met. They were rogues and trusted no one, but they had known each other a long time. There was between them the understanding and respect a chess player might have for a player of mahjong.

A *foki* brought tea in a pot with a bamboo handle. He set the pot on the table and surrounded it with Chinese tea cups, like a hen surrounded by her chicks. T.L. poured out. The tea was pale gold, and, while he poured, a tiny dust, storm swirled in each cup. When he stopped pouring, it settled to the bottom. The room was filled with the fragrant aroma of Chinese tea.

"*Ch'a, van Loon, t'ai t'ai?*" T.L. offered the cup in both hands.

"Thanks, T.L." She sniffed. "It smells delicious."

"No. 1 *T'ieh Kuan Yin* tea—new crop, from Foochow." He watched her sip and he looked at her stocking. She was not a bud, she was a flower, wide open like a red hibiscus in the morning, but, like the tea, she would smell fragrant. Perhaps, like the tea, she could be bought for much money. It was a pleasant thought. To keep it to himself, Chuang drank noisily.

The Tribe watched. Esther sat on the table because she liked her legs to show and because she liked men to look at them. T.L. looked, and wondered what sort of concubine she would make and if she was for sale. If they had behaved differently, The Tribe would have been disappointed.

He took the cup Chuang offered him.

"Well, T.L., anything new?"

"Nothing new."

"You think everything all right?"

"Yes—yes, maybe." Chuang grew pensive. "Only for the monkey men, everything not all right."

"No? They seem to me to be managing."

"For a little time—maybe. But the monkey men are

foolish people. They think they can do what they like. But they make mistakes, and a few die. By 'n by they make more and more big mistakes and the war will spread and many monkey men will die—and for what? ” He shook his head over what he foresaw. “ Maybe by 'n by they learn a little sense, but I think take a long time.”

“ How long, T.L. ? ”

“ Maybe thousand years.”

The Tribe laughed.

“ Too long for me ! I'm interested in the immediate future—in what they'll do with the *Ch'ap'ing*, for instance.”

“ Who knows, *hsien sheng* ? Who knows ? Maybe only Heaven.” Chuang looked at Esther and drank his tea.

A *foki* came in and stood by the curtain.

“ Do you think they'll sink her ? ”

“ Maybe, maybe.”

“ You heard Captain Sloane's story ? ”

Chuang nodded. He drew the metal despatch box to him and shut the lid.

“ You don't think much of it—or of him ? ”

“ Mister Sloane is a foolish man. He drinks too much and he is *ma ma hu hu ti* about his wife.” T.L. finished his tea with a soft sucking noise. Even about the van Loon *t'ai t'ai* it was not necessary for a man to be a fool. “ Also last night Mister Sloane went in one motor car with Mister Mordent to No. 509 The Peak.”

“ He did what ! ”

“ He went in one car with Mister Mordent from Hongkong hotel to the house of Mister Yule, the Deputy.” Chuang sighed. “ By 'n by he came back in Peak tram. Also Mister Sloane was a litty drunk.”

“ What the devil is Sloane up to ? ”

“ Maybe he told the wrong lie—or maybe he told too many.” Chuang shook his head. He turned to the *foki*, inviting him to speak. He was a junior assistant but he had waited long enough.

The *foki* spoke briefly, in Cantonese.

T.L.'s face did not change, but, as the *foki* disappeared through the curtain, he shook his head again.

“ I very sorry. Yesterday I make mistake. I give Mister Sloane one jade crab. Very expense, this crab. More better I give my ol' friend, Mister Yule, the Deputy.”

The Tribe's eyebrows did not move. When he spoke, his tone was unconcerned.

"Why's that, T.L.?"

"I think Mister Deputy Yule stay in Customs—maybe stay in Customs long time."

"No doubt he will." The Tribe crossed his ankles under the chair and looked at the floor. "No doubt he will. And Captain Sloane?"

Chuang searched round his trouser pocket. He drew out a chain with a bunch of keys at the end of it. He fumbled for and found the key he needed to lock the metal box. There was no longer any need to conceal the fact that he was going away.

"I think Mister Sloane out of Customs very soon."

"Oh, what makes you think that?"

"Last night, after Mister Sloane came down in Peak tram, Mister Yule and Mister Mordent visited Kowloon Dock Company. . . ."

"That Kowloon Dock Company!" The Tribe's eyebrows arched. "Last night? What time was it?"

"Maybe eleven o'clock, maybe litty mo' late. By 'n by *Henry Keswick* . . ."

"The *Henry Keswick*! What on earth did Peter Yule want with her?"

"Mister Yule no go in *Henry Keswick*." Chuang rolled sideways in his chair and pushed the keys back into his pocket.

"Only Mister Mordent go."

"T. L., have you any idea what they're up to?"

"Kowloon Dock people say Mister Mordent taking *Henry Keswick* to Pinghoi, for towing one Customs vessel."

"Oh!" The Tribe looked past Chuang at the barred window. There was only one Customs vessel at the moment for him. "So the Japs set her adrift and now she's grounded somewhere near Pinghoi?"

Chuang nodded.

"Aground on sand, Pinghoi west side. Maybe only little aground." He sighed. "*Henry Keswick* very strong tug."

"Maybe she is, and maybe the *Ch'ap'ing* isn't hard aground, but if the Japs set her adrift, what will they do if they see the *Henry Keswick* towing her off? The *Ch'ap'ing* is evidence against them." The Tribe patted his bald patch. "The little yellow men won't like it—they won't like it at all."

Chuang tested the lid of the metal box.

"I think this time Japanese do nothing. *Henry Keswick* has British flag. Maybe by 'n by Japanese make plenty trouble for British people. Maybe by 'n by . . ."

"But you don't think they'll do anything yet? Well, maybe you're right." The Tribe looked at Chuang. "I suppose this is what your *foki* told you just now?"

Chuang shook his head.

"All this I savvy las' night." He stretched out one flat foot and shut the door of the safe. "Just now my *foki* say message come from Waglan lighthouse: can see *Henry Keswick* and one Customs vessel."

"The *Henry Keswick* towing a Customs vessel!" The Tribe glanced at Esther and back at Chuang. "Was that all your *foki* said? What about the *Ch'ap'ing's* flag, T.L.? Didn't he say anything about that?"

"Flag? Customs flag?" Chuang shook his head and reached for his stick. "I no savvy this flag business." He sat resting his hand on the narwhal horn, fatigued by so much talk.

The Tribe stood up.

"Well, Esther, I think you and I had better get back to the hotel."

Chuang went with them through the shop. At the door The Tribe put on his hat.

"Well, T.L., I expect we'll see you in a day or two."

"*Ts'ai chien, hsien sheng.*" The sunlight glinted on T.L.'s glasses. "Maybe in a litty while. Just now I go Wuchow—visit my ancestors."

"Oh?" The Tribe glanced into the street. "I suppose you'll go up river with Charlie Browne? The *Tai Ming's* due this afternoon, isn't she?"

Chuang shook his head.

"This time go Canton first by train. Train litty more quick."

"I see." T.L.'s ancestors had been in the ground a long time. They would not run away. "Well, we'll see you when you come back—that is, if we're still here."

"Good-bye, T.L., and thanks for the lovely tea."

"*Ts'ai chien, van Loon t'ai t'ai.*"

Esther smiled at the old crab. He was a rogue and he made the most improper suggestions without opening his mouth, but he did not make the occidental mistake of mentally undressing a woman. He looked at what he was shown and waited for more.

She followed The Tribe across Queen's road. She could not help feeling sorry for Tony, now his plans had begun toppling about his ears. But she was glad too. It made her

less afraid of him and less afraid of the next step. She caught up with him at the side entrance to the hotel and they went in and up the stairs together. Outside the door to the Ladies she hesitated.

"I'm going in here."

"All right. I'll wait in the lounge."

"After I've powdered my nose, I'm going over to the Kowloon side."

"Oh? So you're running away too. I thought we were to wait here for Jo?"

"You're to wait for Jo. Most of what he has to say, he has to say to you."

"Why to me? I'm not the scapegoat. Peter is."

"That was the original idea. It isn't any more."

"No?" The Tribe looked at his reflection in the mirror door. The news about the *Ch'ap'ing* had been a shock to him, but he did not intend to discuss it with Esther, any more than he had discussed it with T.L.

"Your plan—like all your plans—was all right for you, Tony. But not for anyone else, especially not for me." She paused. "I'm going to leave most of the explaining to Jo, but your plan was no good to me because you overdid it. You weren't satisfied with ruining Peter socially. You had to wreck his career. You didn't stop to think that, without a job, he wouldn't be much good to me as a husband."

"Then why give Jo more evidence against Peter than he had already?"

"I gave him more evidence—that's true. But not against Peter. I gave him all the evidence he needs against you."

"Oh? What sort of evidence?"

"I told him last time we stayed in Macao, Henri was here in Hongkong, and I told him the history of the last ten years. Jo prefers you as co-respondent and I like it better too. At least you will marry me." She looked at the hard bright eyes. "You'll be well able to afford it—with all the shares you have in the Tamshui Motor Bus Company and the Kowloon Deep Well Boring Company, to mention only two."

The Tribe pulled his long nose.

"The shares aren't in my name, Esther dear, in case you were counting on that."

"No, I don't suppose they are." She hated the way he said 'Esther, dear.' "And I don't suppose anyone—not even that wife of his—heard what you said to Captain Sloane. But if the *Ch'ap'ing* is flying a flag. . . ." She paused, her

palms moist. "You'll need to do some explaining, Tony. If you and I were in Shanghai on a belated honeymoon, what more natural than that you should drop in on the I.G. and do some? The I.G. will listen to you."

He looked at her, a smile on his lips, but the smile did not reach his eyes.

"I knew before we left The Crab's, that if the flag was still where Sloane put it, I'd have to go to Shanghai and see Old Andy and get my version of events in first. That fits in with your scheme, my dear." He patted his bald patch. "But if the *Ch'ap'ing* is not flying a flag, unfortunately for you, I shan't be going anywhere near Shanghai."

"But if she is flying her flag, Tony?" She forced her green eyes to look at him. "It will be worth your while going, and going at once." She pushed the heavy mirror door open. "Maybe if you get Peter confirmed Deputy, he won't bother to go to Shanghai himself and contradict you."

The Tribe looked at her, and something in his eyes made her glad she had an open door at her back.

"There's something in what you say. But I can't see the pirates of Pinghoi letting a sick man like Mordent tow a Customs cruiser away from under their noses, unlooted and with the Customs flag still flying. Their ancestors would turn in their graves." He looked down the stairs. "However, there's a window in the Hongkong club with an excellent view of the harbour, including Kowloon Bay, and, as I have a personal interest in the *Ch'ap'ing* and in the *Ch'ap'ing's* flag, perhaps, Esther dear, if you'll excuse me.....?" He lifted his hat and went off down the stairs.

She stood there looking after him, till something made her turn her head. She glanced at the clock over the door and suppressed an exclamation of annoyance. She ran down the stairs and out of the hotel.

She caught the ferry as it was leaving, but it was a quarter past four before it docked on the other side. She hurried into the railway station. As she crossed the concourse to the ticket barrier, Primrose saw her and ran down the platform.

"Esther darling!" Primrose slipped an arm round her. "I thought you were never coming. Is it all right?"

"I hope so, Primrose. We've just got to wait."

"Wait? Wait for what?"

"For the *Ch'ap'ing*. For her to come in with her flags flying."

"And if she doesn't?"

"She's got to—just got to." Esther gave the slim fingers at her waist an affectionate pat.

"Does The Tribe think she will?"

"He doesn't think anything. He's gone to the Hongkong club to wait and see for himself."

"Oh!" Her eyes were steady, though there were no chestnut flecks in them. "So we're all in this, Esther?"

"Yes, Primrose, we're all in this."

They had walked almost the length of the train.

"Christopher and Peter are in the next carriage. Come and tell Peter about The Tribe. He'll want to know."

They stopped by a first class smoker and Peter came out.

"Oh, hullo Esther." He glanced down the platform. "Where's The Tribe?"

"In the Hongkong club watching Kowloon Bay. Waiting to see what happens."

"Oh—so he knows." Peter shrugged his shoulders. "Well, he has a grandstand seat." He glanced at the station clock. "Mordent was on his last legs by the time the *Henry Keswick* got away, but he said, if everything went all right, he hoped to be in Kowloon Bay an hour or so before dark." He looked at Primrose. "When your Dad's train has gone, we'll go along the line to Holt's wharf. We can keep a look-out from there."

"All right, darling." She took his hand. "What do you expect we'll see?"

"I know what we've got to see. The *Ch'ap'ing's* flag...."

"That's right." Esther nodded. "Righter than you know."

"What don't I know, Esther?"

"That, if the flag is there, Tony is having dinner with Jo and me at The Grips, to discuss arrangements for my divorce—with Tony as co-respondent."

"The Tribe! The Tribe as co-respondent!" Peter gasped. "My hat...."

"Well, you sound much more surprised than he did." Esther smiled. "Then, if the *Ch'ap'ing* is flying her flag, Tony and I are off to Shanghai to see Old Andy and get your name in the autumn circular as Hongkong Deputy with the temp. dropped."

"Esther, you angel!" Primrose kissed her.

"What's going on here?" Sir Christopher came to the window. "Oh, hullo Esther. What's all the chat about Peter?"

"It's petticoat government, sir. I'm having my life arranged for me."

"By whom? These two young women?"

Peter nodded.

"Well, my boy, take my advice and let 'em. There's nothing better than a woman who arranges your life for you. It's a help to any man. For a man who means to be a public servant—it's a *sine qua non*."

"Dear Christopher!" Primrose moved to the window.

The guard blew a preliminary blast on his whistle. There was a commotion at the barrier and T. L. Chuang waddled onto the platform, followed by a servant carrying his metal despatch box and the basket with the two thermos flasks. Behind the servant was a tall Chinese girl with red cheeks, dressed in a long gown of green silk that fitted like a sheath. It was split to the knee to enable her to walk. As T. L. passed the coach, he raised his hat.

Peter returned the salutation.

"What a large person!" Primrose watched a flat foot placed firmly on the first step. "Who is it, Peter?"

"T. L. Chuang." One hand grasped the narwhal horn and the wrinkles deepened across the back as the big body hauled itself into the coach. "The old crab himself." He looked at Esther. "He seems to be going away and taking some of his household with him. Surely that's a good sign?"

"I'm sure it is." Esther nodded. "Though I'm pretty certain he decided to leave as soon as he heard the *Ch'ap'ing* was ashore. He doesn't know whether the flag's still there or not. He's only afraid it is."

Peter watched the girl in green go past.

"Still, I can't help feeling that seeing the old crab scuttle for a flat stone, is a good sign."

Primrose looked at the sheer silk that touched everywhere and clung to everything it touched.

"And is that his daughter?"

"No, Primrose." Sir Christopher leaned out of the window to kiss her good-bye. "That's nobody's daughter."

"Christopher, you wicked old man!" She put her arm round his neck and kissed him. "I'll come back to Canton as soon as I can."

"There's no hurry." He glanced over her shoulder. "You have to look after Peter now."

The guard blew his whistle again and the driver leaned out of his cab and cased the big C class engine into motion.

The engine puffed once, twice, three times, made purposeful puffs, the driving wheels moved, took the strain, lost their grip and spun wildly. A pillar of exhausted smoke shot up to the roof of the station and mushroomed there. The driver adjusted the steam pressure. The engine puffed again more deeply. The driving wheels gripped and held. The engine surged forward, and, meekly, the train followed it out of the station.

They stood on the platform waving till it rounded the bend at Holt's wharf. Peter turned to Esther.

"By the way, where's T.L. off to?"

"To Wuchow—to pay his respects to his ancestors. He believes in avoiding all the trouble he can."

"Well, I only hope the trouble he's avoiding, happens." He took Primrose by the arm. "As we pass the office, I'll tell them where I'm going and I'll pick up a pair of binoculars from Mr. Chan. Then we can follow the permanent way to Holt's wharf."

Before they reached the office, Mr. Chan, the clerk in charge, came out.

"Mr. Yule, sir, the head office on the telephone."

"I'm not surprised." He turned to Primrose. "It's Archy—fussing as usual. I won't be a second." He followed Mr. Chan behind the counter. "Mr. Chan, after this, I'd like to borrow your binoculars if I may." He picked up the telephone. Through the window he could see junks moored at the railway wharf.

"Yule here. Who is it?"

"It's me, sir. Rosemary Lee."

"Oh yes, Miss Lee. . . ?"

From the other side of the counter Primrose shaped a scornful 'Archy!' with her lips.

"There's a telegram in from the Inspectorate, sir. . . ."

"What! Another one! My God, what's the trouble now?"

"Oh no sir. No trouble. It's good news—I think. . . ."

"You think. . . ?"

"Well, sir, I guess you know I'm not all that sure what you want the Inspectorate to do about that despatch of yours."

"Oh no, of course not. I forgot." He smiled at Primrose's drumming, impatient fingers. "Anyway, what did the Inspectorate make of the outport comments?"

"That's just it, sir. It's the comments. I guess I better read it. It says: 'In view of the unanimously adverse

comments from the outports junk rules and regulations need not be strictly enforced till the blockade is lifted stop despatch follows stop Anderson I.G. ”

“Rosemary, this is terrific! I’ll be over as soon as possible.” He put down the receiver, picked up Mr. Chan’s binoculars and swept round the counter. He dragged Primrose out of the office into the sun.

“Pet, this is terrific.”

“What is?” She put her nose in the air. “You called her Rosemary when you got excited and forgot I was there.”

He kissed her.

“I was far too excited to know what I called her. Primrose, I’ve won my junk war!”

“Your war! Oh Peter. . . .”

“There’s a telegram in from the I.G.” He quoted it. “. . . till the blockade is lifted. You see. . . .” He gestured at the moored junks. “All these will keep the sea.”

She kissed his cheek.

Esther had walked on along the siding past the godowns. They followed her down the permanent way to Holt’s wharf. From there they could see beyond the workshops at Hunghom into Kowloon Bay. Peter sat on a bollard. Primrose joined Esther on the edge of the wharf. She looked back at Peter.

“I don’t see anything.”

“It’s hardly time, pet.” He glanced over his shoulder at the clock tower while he unfastened the catch on the binocular case. “Mordent said half past five at the earliest, and only then if his belly held together and the *Ch’ap’ing* wasn’t hard aground.” He moved over. “Come and sit here with me and wait.”

“Don’t move.” Primrose sat down beside him. “There’s lots of room.”

Esther stayed on the edge of the wharf, staring over the water. It was a good two miles to the buoys where the Customs cruisers lay. Close at hand a kite dipped and his crooked feet snatched something from the water. Without checking his flight, he bent his head and tore at it with his hooked beak. Whatever it was, he had no use for it. It fell thirty feet and from the splash, ripples widened over the smooth surface till they merged with the restless green water of the harbour. Five minutes passed.

“Peter. . . .?” Esther was staring in the direction of Lyemooon.

"Yes? What is it?" He joined her on the edge of the wharf.

She pointed.

"Isn't that a tug with something behind her?"

He adjusted the binoculars to his eyes.

"Where?" He felt Primrose beside him. The kite flapped past on heavy beating wings, found an updraft, and, as though lifted by an unseen hand, soared above their heads.

"Where, Esther? I don't see. . . ."

"There, Peter!" Her out-stretched arm unbalanced her.

"Here! Don't fall in. Maybe I'm not looking in. . . ."

"Peter, can't you see! She's turning towards us now."

"I see her!" Primrose plucked at his coat. "Peter, she's leaving a trail of smoke."

He picked up the smoke and then the tug. It was the *Henry Keswick* with a grey vessel in tow.

"And it is the *Ch'ap'ing*. But I can't see any flag." Peter pressed the glasses against his eyes and stared across the intervening water. "Nor any flag on the tug either. Damn it, the *Henry Keswick* must be flying hers." He adjusted the focus. "Maybe there's a following wind." He glanced down at the unruffled surface at his feet. "There's not much wind at all."

The *Henry Keswick* had altered course. A stray puff of wind wandered through Lyemooon, caught the *Ch'ap'ing's* flag and blew it across her stern. They all saw it.

"Oh Peter. . . ?" Primrose squeezed his arm.

But Peter had turned the binoculars on the Hongkong club. Dimly behind the plate-glass windows, he saw a tall figure with a stoop, staring out to sea, watching the flag flutter in the breeze.

"Peter!" Primrose plucked at his sleeve. "It was the Customs flag, wasn't it?"

"Yes, pet, it was. The Tribe saw it too."

"The Tribe?" She glanced across the harbour at the blank windows of the club.

"I could just make him out. He's gone now."

"Gone? Gone where?"

"To look up the sailings to Shanghai, I expect." He lowered the binoculars. "Esther seems to have gone too." They watched her hurry along the permanent way towards the ferry. He smiled. "She means to see The Tribe before he sees Jo. From now on, I fancy, The Tribe will have company on his travels."

Primrose smiled.

"Esther always said she meant to end up with her Tony." She hugged his arm. "But I'm not ending up with you, Peter darling. I'm beginning."

"I don't deserve such luck." He kissed her. "But I'll try to, and I'll try to be a good. . . ."

"A good servant to China."

"Yes, darling, a good servant to China if that's what you want."

THE END

